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ALL AROUND

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THE MAGIC RIFLE.

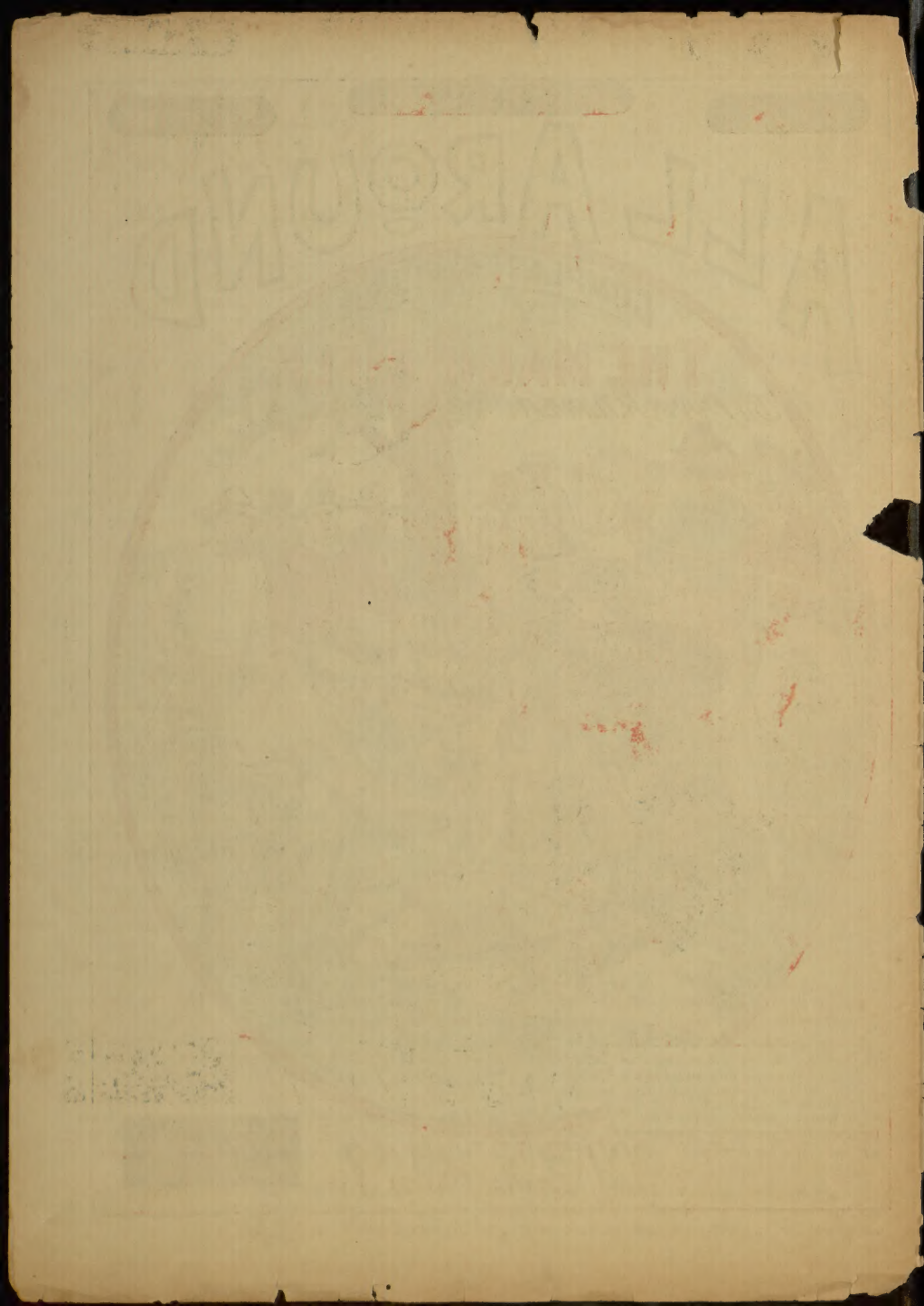
By FRANK R. TURNER.



They dragged the prisoner to the stream, unheeding the groans caused by his broken leg, and, by the application of water, changed the color of his face.

WEEKLY.

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ALL AROUND WEEKLY

CONTAINING STORIES OF ALL KINDS

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THE MAGIC RIFLE

OR,

FIGHTING FOR THE LONE STAR

FRANK R. TURNER

CHAPTER I.

AN OFFER DECLINED.

"He's a mighty fine hoss!"

"Clean-limbed as a marble statoo."

"Swift as an eagle, I'll bet my rifle."

"With plenty o' bottom, too."

"We must have him."

The speakers were two men who were inspecting a large black horse which was tied to a post near a house in the town of Arkansa. No map of to-day will show the afore-said town, for its brief existence ended thirty years ago.

It was in Texas, in the year 18—, that the scenes we are about to describe were enacted. Texas was not at that time a part of the United States, but a republic, young and feeble, but ambitious, struggling to throw off the yoke of Mexican oppression, and filled with as wild, restless and, withal, as lawless a population as ever inhabited a so-called civilized district.

More of its history will appear anon, but for the present we have to deal with the two men before mentioned.

Texan towns were then small and insignificant, and Arkansa could boast of but twenty houses all told. Founded by a former resident of the State of Arkansas, he had patriotically given it his favorite name, slightly altered, and, no doubt, he expected it to become in time the metropolis of the Lone Star republic.

Its population was composed entirely of emigrants from the Northern States; few Mexicans dared set foot on its sacred soil, but no attempt was made to check the lawless-

ness which crept into it, as such things will creep into every new settlement.

The two men who had so earnestly expressed their admiration of the black horse, had found him secured near the door of the single hotel, or tavern, of the place, and though they did not have the appearance of men of wealth, they at once decided to purchase.

They entered the tavern.

Jack Thompson, the keeper of the place, was seated behind the bar, calmly smoking, but, besides him, the room had but one occupant—a young man who was talking with him in an indolent way.

The newcomers, veteran Texans that they were, needed but one glance to recognize the stranger as one newly from the "States," and this discovery served to add fuel to their purpose.

"How are ye, Jack?" said one of them, genially, as he nodded to Thompson. "Mighty fine day, this."

"Ca'm as a spring dove," answered Thompson, between the whiffs of his pipe.

He was not pleased to see the new arrivals, for he knew no good of them and did not care for their custom, but he preferred their good will to their enmity.

The young man at the table was attentively observing them. He had, as yet, seen little of the typical Texan, and such he felt them to be, though their ruffianly look indicated that they represented the lowest grade of the class.

"We want some liquor," continued the spokesman; "some o' the genuine article, an' no adulteration. Stranger, I allow you'll take a pull with me."

The last remark was addressed to the young man at the table, and knowing a refusal would make him two enemies, he arose and walked to the bar.

All drank, but the younger man indulged but lightly, and then each helped himself to a seat.

"Jack," continued the Texan, "an introduction is in order."

The host promptly complied with this suggestion, and the stranger, whose name was Earl Harding, was then made acquainted with two men who were destined to play an important part in his immediate future—Ben Hobart and Eli Billings.

They at once settled down to the work of making themselves agreeable, but they had a definite object in view and were not long in breaking the ice.

"Haven't been long in Texas, I take it," said Hobart.

"No," said Earl. "I first touched Texan soil less than a week ago."

"Goin' ter settle?"

"I have not yet decided. I am inspecting the country, and if I like it I shall probably remain."

"You can't do better. Texas is bound ter become the garden o' the kentry. The sile is beyond anything in the States, and it may be had fur a song. We have declared our independence o' Mexican rule an' we are goin' ter hev it, but we want men, plenty on 'em an' good men, too, ter kerry the day. In time we hope fur help from the United States. I am an Alabama man myself, an' Eli hails from Kentucky. Might I ask your State, stranger?"

"It is New Jersey."

"A right smart place. We three hail from a center o' wealth, pluck an' manliness. By the way, I was observin' your hoss outside. He hain't a Texan animile, I take it?"

"No. I bought him in Louisiana. He is a thoroughbred, but has seen service on the prairie as well as in the States."

"I'd like ter own the brute."

"He is a good animal," said Harding, laconically, but he was beginning to suspect something was in the wind, with the breeze blowing from a Texan quarter.

"What'll yer take fur him?"

"Hero is not for sale, Mr. Hobart."

"I'll give ye a good round price."

"No doubt, but he suits me so well I do not care to part from him."

"I'll give ye more than any other man."

"Should I wish to sell him at any time I will remember your proposal."

"But I would like him now, immediately," the man persisted. "See, hyer is plenty o' money," and he displayed a well-filled purse. "Jest name your price an' it is your'n."

Earl laughed and shook his head.

"Money cannot induce me to part with him," he said.

"I intend to pass some weeks in roving about the country, and while I am doing so I must have Hero. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot sell the horse."

There was a quiet firmness in his voice which convinced Ben of the folly of argument; but his resolution did not waver. Possess the horse he must and would, by fair means or foul.

"But, stranger, we want him fur a particular purpose," he continued.

"So do I," said Earl, good-humoredly.

"Let me tell you why I want him."

He glanced furtively at Thompson, and then lowered his voice.

"Stranger," said he, "did you ever hear o' the Silent Slayer?"

Harding shook his head.

"He is a creatur' o' mystery an' desolation—a man mad or otherwise, who skulks in the bushes by day and rides a swift hoss by night, who is always on the rampage, an' never ter be ketched, an' who drops men dead, here, thar, everywhar, without a warnin'. Some calls him the Silent Rifleman, others the Magic Marksman, fur he kerries a rifle o' peculiar build. When men fall dead they have a bullet in their carcass, jest such as any rifle kerries; but when he shoots thar is no report. He crouches in the chaparral, sights his man, fires, an' the quarry falls dead; but thar was no report."

"That is singular."

"Mightily so, stranger. Some hev said that when he fires thar is a slight puff audible, sech as you can make by bustin' an air-filled paper bag; but, be that as it may, when the Magic Rifle speaks death allays follers."

"An uncomfortable neighbor."

"He is that, an' he is a scourge ter Texas. We hev tried to capter him in vain. He can't be found in the brush, and when he rides his big hoss no one kin run him down. Why I want your brute is ter capter the Silent Slayer."

"Perhaps I will undertake the task myself."

An expression of contempt crossed the face of the Texan, but he was not yet ready to show his hand.

"I'll give you five hundred dollars, cash, fur the animile," he declared.

"Even that does not tempt me. Much as I would like to oblige you, I cannot sell Hero."

"Still, I'm goin' ter ask you ag'in when you hev had a few hours ter think on it," said Ben, with quiet resolution.

Before Earl could answer, the wife of the hotelkeeper appeared and announced that his room was ready, and he arose with an air of relief.

CHAPTER II.

THE WARNING.

Thompson asked Earl to go out with him and see to the stabling of his horse before dinner, and they left the room together. The Texans seemed on the point of following, but finally settled back into their chairs.

The host observed this with pleasure.

"Young man," he said, addressing Earl, "you are my guest for to-day an' you have paid me promptly. That bein' so, I owe you a favor, an' I want to warn you ag'in them chaps inside. They are tough characters, an' not to be trusted no more than a greaser. Moreover, you want to keep your eye well on your hoss. They want him bad,

an' have him they will, ef possible, even ef they have to send an ounce o' lead into you."

"I suspected as much, and thank you for the warning. I shall not yield Hero tamely, though, to them or any other border ruffian."

Thompson explained the character of the two men more freely. They were of the rough, lawless classes so abundant in Texas at that day, known to be daily breakers of the law, but allowed to live, because to exterminate all of their kind would be to sweep away half of the population, and at a time when there was a prospect that every arm would soon be needed to resist the efforts of Mexico to bring Texas more fully under her control.

The black horse was stabled, the door locked, and then in five minutes Earl Harding was alone in his room.

He sat down to smoke and reflect on his situation.

As he had said, he was a newcomer in Texas, but he was not a novice in the line of adventure. He had been a sailor for two years and since then had met and fought nearly every species of wild animal to be found in the United States; so he was not entering upon his Texan career a city-bred and beardless boy.

He expected trouble from Ben Hobart and Eli Billings, but he was not the one to falter at the thought of danger.

Texas was at that time in a very disorderly condition. Originally a part and parcel of Mexico, she had of late attracted so many people from the States to her fertile soil that the American population had grown greater than the Mexican, and, with the energy of their natures, they aspired to rule for themselves and be a wholly independent republic.

Accordingly, independence was formally declared, and a war-like front shown their former masters, but Mexico was not inclined to give up her rebellious subjects, and more than one encounter had already taken place.

A good deal of romance hovers around the struggle of the defenders of the Lone Star Republic, but those who knew her people at that day can remember little that was noble about them.

True, there were honorable and law-abiding citizens, but many of those who had come from the States had fled to avoid punishment for their crimes, and these men made a wild, restless, unscrupulous element which was unpleasantly numerous.

All this was well known to Earl Harding, but though he was prepared to defend his rights against all braves, he intended to associate with those of superior moral principles.

The meeting with Hobart and Billings might yet give him trouble, but he carried a good rifle and was not inclined to borrow trouble.

Two hours later he saddled Hero and prepared to ride on to the next town, which he hoped to reach by sundown. The Texans were nowhere to be seen, and had not Thompson repeated his warning when bidding him farewell he would have had strong hopes that he had seen the last of them.

Leaving Arkansa, he started along the trail which led to Santee at a brisk trot.

The scene was a fine, and, to him, a novel one. As far as the eye could reach, the prairie stretched without a hill

or hollow to break its grand level. Now and then a thick grove of trees, or motte, was visible, but except for them only the tall, waving grass was to be seen.

Ardent admirer of nature that Earl was, he could not but be impressed by such a scene, and he grew so abstracted in his survey that he forgot that this ground was a roving place alike for the white outlaws, Comanche and Lipan Indians, and the Silent Slayer; until a sudden curve in the trail brought him in sight of two men who were riding slowly in advance and not a hundred yards from him.

The single glance showed them to be white men, the second revealed the fact that they were Ben Hobart and Eli Billings. It was not a welcome discovery, and Earl was checking the speed of his horse, when Ben suddenly looked over his shoulder, uttered a shout, and then they paused for the young man to join them.

He rode forward without apparent hesitation, trusting to his weapons if they attempted mischief, but nothing could exceed their show of good-will.

"Hello, Jarsey!" cried Hobart, genially. "I didn't expect ter see ye. Goin' ter Santee?"

"Such is my intention," said Earl, assuming an easy and friendly air.

"Then we may as waal ride together, as our road runs the same way. There is some danger by the trail, you know, fur the Kimanch might be skulkin' ter pick us off, or Dexter Cook's gang might bound up from the grass like jumpin'-jacks."

"Dexter Cook! Who is he?"

"Never heard on him? That's curious. Waal, he is an outlaw who has a gang under him composed partly o' Mexicans an' partly o' Texans, who are no better nor they orter be. Folks round hyer know 'em purty waal."

"You seem to have inconveniences of all kinds here."

"We do that—red, white and otherwise."

"Do you ever have trouble with them?"

"Frequently, stranger, but Ben Hobart kin usually hoe his row anywhar. Men call me the Texan Slasher, an' I don't care fur none on 'em. Lord love ye! fightin' is my trade an' pastime."

The Slasher grimaced and made a few passes with his empty hand at an imaginary foe. He acted like a playful grizzly bear, but Earl Harding was not disposed to admire or trust his mood.

"There will be a chance for all to fight before long, I suppose," he said.

"You kin rely on that. Ef Mexico would let us alone we would soon be rollin' in honey an' luxury o' all kinds, but she won't. She wants a muss, an' she'll get it. Then you'll find the Slasher at the fore."

Ben rumbled on in this fashion while they were riding the next two miles. He seemed in a very amiable mood and did not again mention Earl's horse, but the young man saw that both often glanced at the proudly stepping animal.

Conversation abruptly ceased, however, as they reached a small river that cut through the prairie. It was a place where travelers always sought water for themselves and their horses, and as the trio paused for that purpose, Earl looked with interest at the course of the stream.

It was the dry season of the year and half of the channel was bare, but a small belt of the liquid flowed along and reflected the overhanging trees which lined the bank.

Because he was looking with so much curiosity, Harding saw, before his companions, a single horseman who came galloping toward the river with the evident intention of crossing a hundred yards above.

That he was not a white man, Earl at once saw. The brown skin, scalp-lock and dress were those of an Indian, and as Ben Hobart saw him he laconically muttered: "Kimanch!"

Just then Earl made another discovery. The Indian's steed was carrying double; his owner bore a woman in his arms and as her face was turned toward them the young man saw that she was both white and young.

"Look, men!" he cried. "The wretch has a prisoner!"

"So he has," said Ben, lazily.

"Quick, let us go to the rescue!"

"Nonsense! It ain't any o' our bus'ness."

"But she is a white girl."

"What o' that?"

"Would you see one like her in the power of a Comanche warrior and do nothing to rescue her?" the young man hotly cried.

"Jarsey," replied Ben, coolly, "hyer in Texas we ginerally attend ter our own bus'ness. I advise you ter do the same or you may get more nor you anticipate."

There was a touch of menace in the voice of the Texan, but Earl was too much interested to observe it.

He had caught sight of a dozen horsemen thundering along in the Comanche's rear, and the discovery that they were white men removed his last doubt.

"By my life, I'll run the risk of shooting his horse!" he cried, as he raised his rifle to his shoulder and covered the Indian's steed.

CHAPTER III.

THE RANGERS.

The Texans exchanged glances full of meaning.

"Shall we do it?" Ben Hobart asked.

"No," said Eli, hastily; "that is Buck Alden's gang."

The crack of Earl's rifle interrupted them. He had fired with some anxiety, since it was to be his first shot in Texas, but he had scarcely lowered his rifle when the Comanche's horse went down in a heap and the riders were flung several feet beyond.

Earl saw that the pursuers were near at hand and without waiting to reload, he galloped toward the common point of interest.

He saw the Comanche gain his feet with unexpected quickness, and flash a keen glance around him. It was enough to settle any doubts he might have entertained; the first pursuers were almost at hand, and to attempt to carry away his prisoner would be madness.

Indeed, his own life was in deadly peril, and he started for the brush on the further side of the river at full speed.

Growing somewhat excited, Earl shouted a command

for him to halt, but there was one who was there before him.

Another rifle cracked and the redskin fell, and in a minute more all his foes came cantering in together.

Earl saw that the girl was regaining her feet, but his attention was, for the most part, fixed on the men who had come to her rescue. All were of American appearance, and not unlike Hobart and Billings, but the young man quickly decided that they had far better faces.

None of them seemed to notice him, but a rush was at once made for the Comanche. The well-aimed bullet which had prostrated him had merely broken his leg and saved him for border justice, but the fact came near costing them dearly.

The man had gained a sitting position and with a set face and leveled pistol, he faced them as though prepared to sell his life dearly, nor were they long left in doubt.

The weapon cracked, a bit of lead grazed a Texan's ear, and then he was seized by as many men as could lay hands upon him.

"String him up ter a tree!" shouted one of the rescue party, and others echoed the cry.

"Hold on, thar! I reckon I'm the chief o' this gang!" said an authoritative voice.

Earl looked at the speaker with sudden interest, for it might be the leader of this party was a man of consequence. He was much like the others, however, broad-shouldered, muscular and rough of appearance, with long hair, a shaggy beard and a sun-browned face, but even then the American noticed that there was a mild light in his gray eyes, and his voice, though firm, was pleasing and kindly.

"Hold on ter the varmint while I look the scene over," continued the Texan leader.

He flashed a quick glance from Earl to the young lady, who showed no signs of having been injured, and then advanced and took her hands.

"Miss Ohio," he abruptly said, "you are hurt?"

"Not in the least, Buck," she answered. "I will acknowledge I have been a good deal frightened, but I am just as well and sound as when you saw me last."

Earl Harding was looking at her in surprise. He had expected to find every one rude and uncouth in Texas, but in her he saw beauty, refinement and intelligence, blended to such a degree as to surprise him. The music of her voice impressed him peculiarly, and he was already wondering if he was to be allowed to make her acquaintance.

"Glad on it, little one!" said the ranger, who then turned to Earl.

"Stranger," said he, "I reckon you fired the shot that killed yonder hoss."

"Yes, sir, I did" was the modest reply.

"You did a good deal, an' helped us at the same time. Hyer's my hand, an' my name is Buck Alden."

The American started with surprise, and warmly clasped the hand so frankly extended to him. Jack Thompson had told him of Buck Alden, the famous ranger captain, and he silently thanked his spirit of good fortune for this favorable introduction to the man.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Alden," he said.

"Call me Buck. How did you happen to sight the varmint?"

"I was watering my horse by the river, when I saw the chase and ventured to shoot the Indian's horse."

"I reckon that ain't much Injun about him. Try a little water on his face, boyees."

They dragged the prisoner to the stream, unheeding the groans caused by his broken leg, and, by the application of water changed the color of his face from bronze to white.

"I thought so," said Buck Alden. "A white man rigged out as a Kimanch. Didn't dar ter face the music o' his own cussedness, so he tried ter lay it off onter the Injuns. Purty man, he is. See hyer, you p'ison skunk, who be you, anyway?"

The prisoner glared his defiance, but made no reply.

"You painted imp o' ugliness, why don't you talk? What's your name?"

There was no answer.

"Will you speak or not?"

The prisoner continued silent.

"Jest as you say; I won't tease you. Whoever you may be, I reckon you are not too good fur hangin'. Git, a lariat, boyees, an' run him up ter a tree. Woman-stealers ain't wanted in Texas. They are wuss than Greasers. Dave Nichols, take Miss Ohio over yon till this affair is over."

The man indicated gallantly sprang off his horse, assisted the girl to a seat, and then the two went through the trees and out of sight.

Already the doomed wretch was struggling in the hands of his executors, and the girl had shuddered at the sight, but shown no disposition to interfere.

What followed was too much for Earl's nerves; he saw the lariat flung over a branch of a tree, one end noosed about the kidnapper's neck, despite his sudden prayers for mercy, but when he was swung clear of the ground the American dashed through the trees and sat with his back to the dreadful scene.

In a few minutes he was joined by Alden and the other Rangers.

"Too much for your nerves?" the leader asked.

"I confess that it was. I am a newcomer in Texas, and I never saw a man hung before. I trust you will not deem it cowardice on my part."

"Certainly not. I don't like the work myself, but when sech varmints git on the rampage, Judge Lynch has ter take a hand in the game occasionally. This villain stole the gal from her father's ranch, an', as I happened along jest then with my boyees, I tuk a hand in the game. I rather suspect the critter belonged ter Dexter Cook's gang."

"I understand he is an outlaw."

"You understand about right. He is the p'isonest kind o' an outlaw. The men under him are both villains an' sneaks, made up o' renegade Texans, skulkin' Mexicans, Injuns an' halfbreeds, an' all candidates for the halter. I'll git arter them some day an' then the fur will fly."

By that time they had reached where Dave Nichols and the girl were awaiting them, but the latter's face turned away.

"It sickens her ter think o' the hangin' even ef he did steal her," said Buck. "She is a fine gal, she is."

"Who is she?"

"Ohio Burbank, darter o' the Alcalde of Santee."

"A queer name for a girl."

"It was the old man's fancy. He kim from the State o' Ohio, an' he clapped the name onter her. Which way be yar bound, stranger?"

"I was on my way to Santee."

"Then you may as wael ride with us."

The party started, and as Buck rode to the side of Ohio, Earl had the pleasure of being introduced to her. She acknowledged the presentation with the grace of a lady of the States, and her smile seemed uncommonly attractive.

She briefly told of her captivity, but as there was nothing of particular interest to the reader, it need not be recorded here.

So interested was Earl, they had gone a mile before he remembered that Ben Hobart and Eli Billings had not been visible since he fired at the kidnapper's horse.

Buck perceived his start and asked the cause, whereupon he told of his experience with the pair. The ranger chuckled.

"You kin bet your life they wouldn't come whar I was. They know my way, an' I know their'n too wael fur their good. Some day, I reckon, Judge Lynch will hev ter deal with them. They are mighty bad citizens—I suspect they are in league with Dexter Cook—an' you are lucky ter be rid on 'em. Ef they turn up ag'in, don't trust 'em, an' ef they hev took a fancy ter your horse, don't leave him whar they kin get their hands on him."

CHAPTER IV.

SANTÉE.

The Rangers rode on toward the town at a trot, and Buck Alden talked steadily to Ohio and Earl. He came to the latter favorably recommended by his name, and he liked him from the first. He was rough of look and manner, but there was an honest look in his gray eyes, and a heartiness without ostentation, which pleased Harding.

The latter endeavored to make himself agreeable in turn. He would enter upon his Texan career under most favorable circumstances if he could gain the good will of Buck Alden, the famous Indian fighter and foe of Mexico. As Ben Hobart stood for the lowest type of Texan ranger, so Alden represented the nobler grade.

Earl did not confine his powers of fascination to the captain. He had been so much pleased with Ohio Burbank that he hoped to add friendship to the gratitude she had expressed for his timely shot.

That he was not unsuccessful was evidenced when, as they drew near the cabins of Santée, she declared that he was to be her guest while he remained at the town.

"You have done me a great favor," she said, "and we do not forget such things in Texas—do we, Buck?"

"There are them that do, but you ain't o' that kind.

Accept the offer, o' course, young man, an' you'll find the alcalde a hospitable man in every way."

Earl was more pleased than he would have cared to confess, and though he had some awe for a man with so resounding a title as "alcalde," he agreed to accompany the fair Ohio to her home.

They soon reached Santee, a place so like other Texan towns of the day, that we need not pause to describe. It was a trifle larger than Arkansas, the houses being mostly built of adobe, or sun-dried bricks, and a few scattering live-oak trees around the habitations gave additional beauty to the scene.

The Rangers dispersed in various directions, but Alden went with the younger people to Alcalde Burbank's home. The latter had been prevented from joining in the late pursuit by an injured knee, but he met them at the door on crutches, and a fresh surprise awaited Earl.

He had expected to see a man very much like a Wall Street broker, but instead the alcalde stood revealed as a man not unlike Buck Alden—stout, broad-shouldered, rough and sun-burnt, and the last bit of awe left the American as he saw the dreaded dignity was in his shirt-sleeves and bare-footed.

"May you die with your boots on, Buck Alden!" cried this worthy, in a voice which was almost a shout. "You have done me an everlasting service, and if you ever want a man hung I'll call him guilty at first sight."

"I gave Judge Lynch my work," smiled the ranger.

"You want to rob me of my dues, you rascal. Ain't I alcalde of this town? Wasn't I put in that, or mayor, or governor, or whatever you see fit to call it, by a unanimous vote? Don't I rule over two-and-twenty magnificent palaces——"

"No, you don't, you dear old goose!" cried Ohio, as she placed her hand over his mouth. "Do stop for breath, and let me call your attention to this gentleman. He stopped the career of my abductors by a shot from his rifle."

"He did right, by thunder!" declared the alcalde. "Young man, you are an honor to Texas. Stick to it, for we want such men when we take our decisive grapple with Mexico. Are you one of Alden's Rangers?"

"No, sir. I am a newcomer in Texas," said Earl, smiling, and now wholly at home in the presence of this peculiar man.

"If you'll settle in Santee, I'll give you a tract of land that can't be equaled east of the Mississippi. We want live men here and honest men, too. We want 'em to whip the greasers, the Comanches and Dexter Cook's gang. Eh, Captain Alden?"

"Right ter a dot, alcalde."

"I usually am. Mr. Harding, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Ohio is all I've got in this world, except Texas, and now you have fired a shot for her sake, you are my friend forever."

"I have invited him to become our guest," said Ohio.

"He hadn't dare to refuse. I'm the alcalde, mayor and city council of this city, and I'd commit him for a vagrant if he declined. Come in, young man; come in, Buck, and make yourselves at home."

The Ranger captain said he would first stable the horses, and by the time he had returned, Earl had indeed made

himself at home, and was smoking the pipe of peace with the eccentric host.

A few hours before, when in the company of Hobart and Billings, the American had been ranking Texans very low, indeed, but in the company of these two men, with Ohio not far away, he had caught the Texas fever in full earnest, and was ready to settle in Santee and be one of their number.

It was a long-to-be-remembered evening. The rough, but friendly and jovial talk of Buck and the alcalde, the softer observations of pretty Ohio, the novelty of cabin life—all combined made Earl wholly at his ease, and he was sorry when the hour for retiring arrived.

Before then he had asked and received permission to join the Rangers. It was the boast of Buck Alden that no mean man was in his company, and he was careful whom he admitted, but he was one who believed in the faces of men as a chart to their character, and he liked Earl Harding.

That night the American's dreams were wild and varied, but the hours passed away without an alarm, and he awoke in the morning in good health and fine spirits.

When he joined the family he found that the captain had already eaten and gone, but he had left word that if Earl wanted to take his first gallop with the Rangers he could report to him an hour later.

The message pleased the American, and he made a hasty breakfast, lingered for a while to converse with Ohio, then saddled Hero and rode out to find Alden.

This was easily done, and with him he found the twenty-five men who composed the band.

"I'm glad ter see you, my boy," said Buck. "Are you still anxious to join our rangers?"

"Yes," was the prompt answer.

"Then I'll introduce you ter the boyees."

He made a brief address, telling them of the new recruit, and the announcement was received in a favorable manner. As a rule, these veterans did not take kindly to newcomers from the States, unless they were burly and bearded men, but Earl certainly had muscle enough, he was twenty-five years old, and he had made many friends the previous day.

"We are goin' over the river on a scout," said Buck, anon. "We have an idea we may strike game in the chaparral, an' human game, too."

"Mexicans?"

"No. We are arter outlaws this time. I have a hankerin' ter put Dexter Cook out o' the way afore we tackle the greasers ag'in, for he may do harm while we are away from our homes. Then, we are liable ter run on some skulkin' Kimanch, an', ef we do, they are ter be served the same way."

The party was soon in the saddle and they rode out of Santee at a gallop.

For three miles their course was on the prairie, but at the end of that time they reached the river and had the chaparral just in front.

The idea was to ride through the wood, making a careful search as they went, and if any enemy was discovered to treat them with border justice, so they forded the stream and began the search.

Earl had enjoyed the gallop over the prairie, but once

in the chaparral the scene changed. The place was wholly unlike the woods of the North. The underbrush was much thicker, rendering the way almost impassable in places, and the thorns of the mesquite bushes furnished a source of annoyance no one could disregard.

It was his first experience of the kind, and his horse was equally unfortunate, so in a short time both were discouraged, and Earl saw, with regret, that Hero was bleeding from several wounds made by the mesquites.

In fact, few States' horses care to pass through a chaparral, but the tough mustangs laugh at the pricks and move steadily along.

So much thought did Earl give the matter, and so slow did he make his advance, he suddenly became conscious that his companions had left him behind. He listened in vain for some sound from them, and then, knowing it would never do to fire his rifle as a signal, he urged Hero on as fast as he would go.

The advance was not long continued. Hero suddenly paused, and a little examination showed Earl that they had reached a growth so dense that it could not be passed through.

Disliking to retreat, he suddenly remembered that he had a sharp knife in his belt, and he dismounted to see if the wood beyond was of such a character as to reward him for cutting a short road for their passage.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

With a farewell caress on Hero's neck, Earl pressed through the bushes for yards, but without finding a place more open. He was about to abandon the attempt when a clearer way was seen at one side and he pushed in that direction.

He had gone but a few feet when he came upon a hut of most primitive manufacture. It was not of adobe or boards, but merely a frame of poles covered over with a material made by mixing prairie grass with clay, something which made a water-proof habitation, but could make no boasts of elegance.

He paused and listened.

All was silent except for the natural sounds of the chaparral, and as he marked the time-worn aspect of the hut, he concluded it must long since have been deserted.

He walked around to the front. There wild vines had grown up the wall, almost concealing the door, and this fact, combined with the fact he could see no footprints, so convinced him that he was about to turn away when a desire to see the interior of the hut caused him to pause.

Only for a moment, and then he pulled aside the vines and entered.

There was no window, and the light from the door was too faint to afford him a clear view, but he had scarcely entered when he heard a stir at one corner and his rifle came to his shoulder.

His first thought had been that he had invaded the lair of a jaguar, but his eyes were becoming more accustomed

to the darkness, and he made out the form of a couch at the point from which the sound had come.

Here he saw a man's head raised above the couch, and he retreated to the door and thrust aside the vines with his rifle.

This additional light served his purpose well; he saw a man stretched on a bed of jaguar skins, and his cause for remaining so quiet was plain when the pallor of his face was considered.

It was not that, however, which made Earl Harding stare so steadily. It was a familiarity about the face for which he could not at first account, and while he looked in such dead silence the man was regarding him with a look of alarm, which increased his perplexity.

"You see to be sick, my good man," he said.

"I am sick," was the reply, in a husky voice.

"What is the matter?"

"It is the fever."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"No. I have friends near here, and they will soon return."

He spoke these words in a way which made Earl believe he wanted to get rid of him, but he was not sure but that the man ought to be investigated before he left.

"This is a singular place for a sick man," he continued.

"It is better than the town. If I was there everybody would want to see me, but here I can have quiet and solitude, you know."

This was a very evident hint, but Earl did not even hear the words. His sight was improving, he was trying to remember where he had seen the man before and suddenly an idea occurred to him which dumfounded him for a while.

Was he dreaming, or was this the man he had seen hung on the previous day by Alden's Rangers?

The idea seemed absurd in the extreme, for dead men do not usually return to life, but after a moment of wavering the last doubt vanished.

The abductor of Ohio Burbank was before him.

It did not take the man long to see that he was recognized, and then the two regarded each other in dead silence for a few moments.

The outlaw quickly rallied, however; he recognized his danger and knew that prompt action was necessary to avert it.

"Why do you look at me so strangely?" he asked, with assumed querulousness.

"I am surprised to see the dead come back to life," Earl promptly answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that Buck Alden did not do his work well yesterday."

"I have nothing to do with Buck Alden."

"He had something to do with you, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Do not play the fool. I recognize you, and I am only surprised to see you alive after your hanging."

"No man has hung me."

"If you deny it, let me look at your left leg. If you

have not a bullet wound there I will acknowledge I am mistaken."

"You are a fool and ruffian!" snarled the fellow, angrily. "Why will you annoy a sick man thus? If I ever get on my feet again I'll treat you to an ounce of lead."

"I don't doubt your readiness to do it, but Buck Alden will take another look at you before then."

"See here!" said the man, ferociously, "I have had enough of your insolence. My friends will soon return, and then out goes your candle."

"Your friends," said Earl, meditatively. "I wonder who they are? Now, I think of it, Ben Hobart and Eli Billings were near at hand when you were hung, and it may be they cut you down and brought you here."

On the heels of this theory came a fresh thought—if the ruffians were near, Hero, whom they so much desired to possess, was every moment exposed to their clutches, and they would jump at a chance to steal him.

This thought was enough to send him hastily back to the door, and before the man on the bed could recover from his surprise, the curtain of vines was lifted and dropped and Earl was gone.

Straight toward where he had left his horse the American pushed his way, disregarding the thorns that pricked his clothing, but he suddenly came to a halt.

He had reached the spot where the animal had been left, but Hero was gone!

One moment he stood confused and at fault, and then he whistled shrilly and peculiarly.

An answer almost instantly came, an answer in the language of the equine race, a whinny he knew had been sounded by Hero.

He dashed through the underbrush in the direction from which it had sounded, rushing along for several feet, and then he arrived at the edge of a small glade which was light and free from bushes.

An unwelcome sight was presented to his gaze. He saw Hero, but he was just entering the brush beyond the glade, and on his back was a man in the usual dress of a Texan.

The latter's face was turned toward the rear, and Earl recognized him—it was Eli Billings!

The American uttered a cry of rage, and tried to put forward his rifle, but it caught in the bushes, and in a moment more the robber would be gone.

Just as he was entering the cover, however, he flung up his arms and fell headlong from the saddle, while Hero, after one bound against the thorny bushes, recoiled, and then came trotting back at Earl's whistle.

The latter was looking in amazement at the fallen man who was lying motionless on the ground. His motive in falling so suddenly from his saddle was not clear, but as he was not a man to die of apoplexy or heart disease, it looked very much as though he was playing some trick.

Earl determined to know, and, with his rifle cocked, stole across the glade.

He reached Billings' side and looked at his face. It was enough. If not dead he was near his end, and Earl lowered his rifle in amazement.

What had stopped the ruffian in his victorious flight?

He lifted his head, and then the dull eyes flamed up a little.

"I am a dead man!" he gasped.

"What is the matter?"

"Did you hear a rifle shot?" was the eager inquiry.

"No."

"Then the Silent Slayer is here."

Wild terror was in the face of the man, and he tried to raise himself, but with a sudden rush of blood from his mouth he fell back dead.

Earl looked keenly around, but no one was in sight. Resolved to settle a doubt, he tore open the hunting shirt of the bravo.

There, directly below the heart, was a small, red hole, the track of a bullet, but no rifle had spoken in the chaparral, and he could but believe the dying assertion of the victim.

He had fallen by the Magic Rifle.

In some thicket the Silent Slayer had lurked, his keen eyes had seen the thief, his mysterious weapon had silently done its work, and, in the midst of his crimes, Eli Billings was dead.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OUTLAW'S LASSO.

Earl remained in his position for several moments, only stirring his head as he looked about the chaparral. He hoped for a sight of the Silent Slayer, but he was not rash enough to seek for him. If he was a man who killed indiscriminately, it was not wise to meddle with his affairs.

The fact remained, however, that he had done the American a service. But for him Eli Billings would even then be speeding away on the back of Hero, and he did not feel any fear of the destroyer.

Of course, the bullet showed that the shot had come from a point to their left, but there was no sign of the marksman. His noiseless rifle had done its work, and he was, perhaps, already half a mile away.

Earl had no disposition to tarry at the spot. The encounter with Billings so near the hut had pretty clearly settled the question of who had rescued the girl-stealer from the fate allotted him by the Rangers, and since Eli had been there it was probable Ben Hobart was not far away.

"I will ride on and tell Buck Alden what has happened," the American decided.

He sprang into the saddle, and with Hero's head toward the west, urged him forward as fast as possible. The way was still thorny and intricate, but less so than formerly, and he was able to make fair progress.

The tragedy of the glade had impressed him deeply. When told about the unseen destroyer by Hobart, he had looked upon the tale as an invention with an object, or the voice of superstition, but the fact that the slayer existed had been clearly shown him.

He was not disposed to ascribe supernatural qualities to him. He must be a man like himself, though the Magic Rifle he carried was not to be understood. At the same time it was not strange that an active mind had found a substitute for gunpowder.

In the midst of his ruminations, he came suddenly upon a horseman who seemed to be a Ranger, like himself, though he could not remember having noticed him before.

The man looked at him keenly for a moment, and then smiled.

"Seed anything yet, young man?" he asked.

"I have not found the main body of the enemy," said Earl, thinking it wise not to be too confiding. "Are we not a good deal behind our party?"

"Not so very much. I was talkin' with Buck Alden a minute ago."

"Which way did he go?"

"Along the path yonder."

"I will ride in the same direction."

"So will I, fur I reckon we ain't goin' ter find any sign ter-day."

They struck in the path together and rode on at an increased pace. The stranger, who gave the name of Birch, talked genially, but there was something about his face which Earl did not like, and he refrained from confiding in him, though he wished to ask information regarding the mysterious slayer.

Birch talked steadily, but even that did not cause Earl to notice the lapse of time, and he finally became uneasy.

"Isn't it about time we saw Alden?" he asked.

"He may have put on a spurt, you know. Be that as it may, we are goin' in the proper direction, an' it don't matter if we don't find him afore the journey is over. We are ter meet at the furdur side o' the bush, you know."

"I wish to see him before then."

"Hev you anything ter report?"

Earl saw the eyes of the man fixed keenly on his face, but he was doggedly fixed in his resolution not to confide in him, so he promptly answered in the negative.

"We are likely ter run on him at any minute."

And then the Texan hummed a tune under his breath, interpolated an oath or two at the touch of a thorn, and rode slowly on.

Earl was not at all satisfied, but what better could he do? The semi-path furnished the best avenue for traveling; they were really going as fast as was advisable, and to cut loose from his companion would be to gratify a dislike which might have no foundation.

"I s'pose you are anxious ter get a rap at the Cook gang, ain't you?" Birch asked.

"I don't know that I am, particularly. I did not come to Texas to fight, but if there's to be a brush with the Mexicans, I am ready for the work."

"How would you like ter hunt the Magic Rifleman?"

"Now you interest me. I have been told of this strange being, but not fully. Who and what is he?"

"An imp o' darkness. I know no more except that he comes an' goes like a spook, is here, than an' everywhar, at the same time. He throws lead silently, but he throws it freely, an' never ter miss. Some think him a phantom, but I reckon he b'ars the form o' a man, an' I would like mighty ter git the double sights on him."

Earl had been listening attentively, and with his gaze fixed upon the Texan. Had it not been for this he might perhaps have noticed that other men than they were near;

men who were crouched in the bushes unseen by him, but not so preoccupied themselves.

As it was, he had no warning of danger until something like a noose settled over his head, and before he could make a movement to cast it off he was plucked from his saddle and landed with considerable force on the ground.

"Once there he was pounced upon by several men, and despite his struggles bound in a very brief time.

The struggle over, he flashed a glance around, thinking to see Birch in a similar predicament, but, instead, the man was sitting on his horse and looking at him composedly.

"Waal done, boys!" he said. "You couldn't have nabbed him neater. Martin, come this way."

One of the men followed him to a spot some yards distant, and a realization of the truth came over the prisoner. The man Birch stood revealed in his true colors, not as a ranger, but as an outlaw, and beyond a doubt as a member of the very gang they were seeking.

Earl was raised to his feet and then Birch soon came back to him.

"Jarsey," he said, quietly, "I reckon you don't know me."

"I know enough of you," said the prisoner, tartly.

"Let me tell more. My name is Dexter Cook."

The American could not avoid a start, for it had not before occurred to him that this was the notorious outlaw himself, and the announcement revealed the full seriousness of his situation.

"Perhaps you would like to go to Buck Alden and tell him I am found?"

"Beggars can't be choosers," said Earl, philosophically.

"That is sensible. I begin to think you are quite a man, Jarsey, though I had been led to think differently. Waal, you are my prisoner, an' your hoss, too, is mine."

"You seem to think his capture of more consequence than mine."

"I have a hankerin' arter good hossflesh, an' I reckon I shall manage ter put him ter good use. Martin, you can proceed with your work."

Earl was placed on the back of an inferior animal, still bound, and with a guard of four men, led by Martin, marched away in a southerly direction.

He attempted to talk with his captors, but they would not answer, and he soon gave up the attempt and devoted his attention to observing the way they were traveling.

What would be the result of his captivity he had no means of knowing. He had gained the impression that the outlaws were not especially fond of killing unless plunder was to be gained thereby; and as they had already secured Hero, his only treasure, there would seem to be no danger for him unless it arose from the principle of the old adage, "dead men tell no tales."

Consequently, there was a hope that he might be held for ransom, or, better still, speedily rescued by the rifles of Buck Alden and his men.

The party then went on for half a mile, and then reached a gully in the densest part of the chaparral. The way was rough and heavily wooded, and as they descended the bank it seemed as though all hope was left behind.

Earl was bound to a tree, and then the outlaws unsad-

dled their horses and settled down with an air of security, which indicated that they entertained no fear of the Rangers.

The prisoner was much troubled by the situation. How serious was his own case he did not know, but had he been free he might soon have put Buck Alden on the right track, and it was not agreeable to think of the band every minute moving away and leaving Dexter Cook in such security.

He had not yet been long enough in Texas to take the inevitable coolly, and he was secretly testing his bonds and muffling under his breath, when the sound of a voice near him caused him to turn.

"Hallo, Jarsey!"

It had been a simple salutation, but the voice was familiar, and when he turned about he saw Ben Hobart.

CHAPTER VII.

NIGHT IN THE CHAPARRAL.

Earl was not surprised at seeing the ruffian, but as he gazed silently and sternly at him, the fellow burst into an unmusical laugh.

"Didn't expect ter see me hyer, did ye, Jarsey?" he said.

"I see nothing strange about it."

"Still, you didn't think, the other day, that I was one of Dexter Cook's lambs?"

"I never heard of him until through you."

"You know him personally now."

"If I remember rightly, you described him and his men as outlaws."

"Quite likely."

"Yet you claim companionship with them."

"Why not? I'm one o' the oldest members of the band. Cook is our yearling Samson an' I'm the Texan Slasher. I am a tornado in a fight, an' a prize-fighter by birth."

"Quite a list of accomplishments."

"Yas. I say, Jarsey, do ye know ye trod heavily on the toes o' Cap'n Cook when you fired that shot by the river t'other day?"

"No."

"Ye did, all the same. That man was one o' the band, an' he was stealin' the gal by Cook's orders."

"Then he deserved the fate with which he met."

"What fate?"

"Hanging."

Ben chuckled hoarsely.

"Don't you risk money in bettin' on that hangin' scrape, Jarsey. Probly ef Buck Alden had knowed the Slasher was nigh, he would not hev left his victim until he stopped strugglin'. As 'twas, your gang had no sooner gone than me an' Eli had the poor devil cut down."

"Where is he now?"

"In a safe place."

"Is Eli here?"

"Don't be too inquisitive, Jarsey. Be content to larn slowly. Bimeby, Dexter Cook 'll give you a full course o' instruction."

There was something ominous in the way the last words

were pronounced, but just then one of the men suggested that it would be well to have dinner while they could, and Ben did not disregard the invitation.

While they were eating, Earl was listening for some sign of fighting. With so many outlaws in the chaparral, it seemed as though the Rangers must chance upon them, but all remained quiet.

Anon, Hobart offered him a piece of meat and conquering his aversion to the questionable stuff, he ate enough to preserve his strength.

After that two hours passed monotonously. Ben Hobart and his companions played cards and smoked, in seeming security, and Earl was puzzled to know what the Rangers were doing.

The languor of all was abruptly broken by the sound of rifles, but the firing was distant, and the outlaws showed no disposition to leave their comfortable quarters.

Earl was more visibly interested. He believed the Rangers had found enemies of some sort and hoped the tide of battle would move toward the depression, in which case there would be some change in his situation. His poor success on his first ride with the Texans galled him, and he longed for a chance to redeem his reputation.

The firing continued brisk for ten minutes and then wholly ceased. The result was in doubt. Within that period a skirmish had been lost and won, but he knew not the victors.

His captors continued their card-playing with the utmost nonchalance. Their coolness surprised and annoyed him, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

In this manner the afternoon wore away, but at dusk there was a stir, and Dexter Cook came back, accompanied by a number of men.

None of them showed signs of battle, but Cook looked angry and morose, and ate his supper in grim silence. Afterwards he spoke to Ben Hobart, who then came to Earl's side.

"The cap'n wants ter see you," said Ben, as he cut the prisoner's bonds.

The latter made no answer, and went in silence to where Cook was sitting. Although his limbs were free, it was no time for escape, for the outlaws were all around him.

"Jarsey," said the leader, abruptly, "I take you ter be a sensible man."

"Thank you," answered Earl, quietly.

"I am going to test you. I want such men as you to be in my company. Will you join us? The necessary qualifications are a cool head and an easy conscience; the results, good usage and a fair division of the spoils."

"You want me to become one of your band?"

"Yes."

"I shall have to refuse, captain. I don't aspire to fame in that direction."

Cook's face did not change, but in glowing terms he pictured the pleasure of the life they led, the profit to be reaped, and various other benefits. All these were to be had for no price except faithfulness.

By the time he had finished, Earl had been given time for thought, and he resolved not to be too fast. It might be, if he refused, that he would be at once slain, and he asked permission to delay his answer until morning.

The outlaw readily consented, and directed Ben Hobart to bind him so that he would suffer no inconvenience during the night.

"You had better agree," said Ben, as he again put on the thongs. Cook is a thoroughbred, an', ef you jine, the Texan Slasher is your friend through thick an' thin."

"I begin to think it will be for the best. Do you know what has become of my horse?"

"No, but he's safe, som'ers. The cap'n don't let sech ch'ices hossflesh fly away. Ef you jine, you'll again ride the beauty."

Earl asked some more questions, making them so artful that neither his aversion nor an undue willingness was visible, and then he was left to his thoughts.

The camp and the chaparral were rapidly becoming as quiet as such places ever are by night. With one man placed as a guard, the outlaws had flung themselves on the ground, and the majority of them were already asleep. They were as contented and as much at ease as though neither danger nor remorse had any claim upon them.

Outside the camp the nocturnal beasts and birds were sounding their usual cries. Prominent among these were the screams of the roving jaguars, but the Texans did not seem to care for them.

Two hours passed, during which time Earl had been harboring some faint hopes of rescue by the Rangers, but as the minutes wore on he grew drowsy, and began to nod. As through a mist, he saw the outlaw guard at his post, standing rigidly upright, but the view grew more and more indistinct as his eyelids drooped lower.

He dozed for a moment, but abruptly awoke. There had been a slight jar, a sound as of the fall of a heavy object, and he looked curiously around.

Dexter Cook and his men still slept—yes, even the guard had lain down, and was undoubtedly deep in slumber.

The dying fire shot a faint glow into his face and as Earl looked he suddenly started. On the temple of the man he had seen a red line, as of blood, and a second glance showed him that the man's eyes were wide open and staring.

One moment the prisoner was confused, and then a startling suspicion assailed him. The fall he had heard, the prostrate man with the red line across his face. What did it mean? What could it mean?"

"By my life!" whispered Earl, "the Silent Slayer has been here!"

Conviction followed the suspicion. That the outlaw had been shot at his post he could not doubt, and as no report had been audible there was but one way of accounting for the fact.

He had fallen by the Magic Rifle!

The American flashed a quick glance around the camp, but no one was visible. The destroyer had done his work, and might then be miles away.

Several minutes passed, but Earl's drowsiness had entirely vanished. Still he was not frightened. Somehow, he did not fear the Magic Rifle, and he actually longed for a sight of the mysterious marksman.

In the midst of all this a cautious whisper directly behind him caused him to turn his head. An unexpected sight awaited him.

A man was standing within a few feet of him, one hand

upon his lips to command caution, while in the other he bore a long rifle. His appearance was that of a Texan, and it flashed upon Earl that he was a Ranger.

Without a word the stranger pointed to the sleeping outlaws, pressed his hand again to his lips, and drawing a knife, advanced toward the prisoner.

Earl understood what was required of him, and remained perfectly still.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOCKWOOD.

The unknown advanced and with a few rapid passes severed the bonds of the American. He handled his knife dexterously and Earl was soon free.

Then the rescuer stooped over a sleeping outlaw and secured his rifle and ammunition, which lay by his side, after which he again turned to Earl, and placed the confiscated articles in his hand.

"Come!" he tersely said, pointing to the denser wood.

His steps were almost noiseless as he crept away, and Earl tried in vain to imitate them, but no telltale sound was made to arouse the outlaws.

In a short time they were beyond the limits of the camp, but the rescuer went forward without a word until a quarter of a mile had been passed. He then turned and Earl came to his side.

"I reckon you are out of that scrape," he said, in a deep voice.

"For which good fortune I owe all to you," said the American, heartily. "I cannot thank you now as I would, but I know you have saved my life."

"Probably Dexter Cook would have made it warm for you."

"Did you come from Buck Alden?" Earl asked.

The rescuer shook his head.

"I have not seen Alden for some time."

"I thought, perhaps, you might be one of his band."

"No, I am a free ranger, or whatever you choose to call it. My name is Lockwood. I saw you in the power of the outlaws, and as they neglected to set any guard, stole in and freed you, as you saw."

"For which I am very grateful, but on one point you make a mistake. They did set a guard."

Earl looked sharply at his companion, but in the darkness only the outline of his face could be seen.

"Where was he?" Lockwood asked, in surprise.

"He was near me at one time, but his usefulness abruptly ended," said Earl, who then told of the strange fate of the sentinel.

"Beyond a doubt your suspicions are correct," said Lockwood. "No one else can shoot a man and make no sound. The man fell by the Magic Rifle, the deed must have been done while I was near the camp. I would give a good deal to see the destroyer."

"Who and what is he?"

"A mystery and an enigma. Some say he is a ghost, a destroying demon, but you and I are not given to super-

stition and we can only believe him a man. Whoever he is, he goes and comes in a mysterious way."

"Do you fear him?"

"No. I never knew an honest man to fall by his hand. Such men as compose Cook's gang fear him, and with cause, and the Comanches know him well, but those who abide by the law are safe from his hand. Ask Buck Alden."

"Where is Buck now?"

"In Santee, I suppose."

"Then I want to go there at once. He must know of the whereabouts of Dexter Cook."

"The outlaw is a hard man to catch. Alden had a brush with him to-day and got the best of it, but the surviving rascals slipped away in the wood like ghosts. They know the chaparral better than the Rangers."

"You seem to know it well."

"Tolerably so. But come, let us go to Santee. He will set the Rangers on the track without delay."

The start was made, and for a long time they plodded on through the intricate way. It was a journey that Earl never forgot. With night on the face of the earth and a mass of branches and vines overhead, through which the sun could scarcely cut its rays by day, we need not say that the darkness was intense.

Nor was this the worst. The thorny bushes caught their clothing and tore their flesh in spite of all precautions, and Earl was on the point of despair when they emerged from the chaparral and saw the open plain which stretched to Santee.

The remainder of the journey was uneventful, but the younger man was weary, and more than ever he lamented the loss of his horse.

On reaching the town they went directly to the house of the alcalde, hoping to find Buck Alden there, nor were they disappointed. Burbank answered the summons at the door and the announcement of their names was enough to gain them instant admission, and the ranger captain was soon aroused.

He shook both men by the hand in a cordial fashion.

"Glad to see you back, Jarsey," he said. "We thought Dexter Cook had wiped you out. Lockwood, did you bring him home, or did he bring you?"

"We brought each other," answered the rescuer before Earl could speak. "There has been trouble in the wood, however, and I think a quick move will place Cook in your power."

"It shall be made, then, by thunder!" said Alden.

"That's the way ter talk," said the alcalde. "Texans are never so tired that they can't turn out in a good cause. Git them together, Buck, an' whip the tarnal creatures out o' their hides."

Buck went through the door at the last word, and Earl, who was somewhat bewildered at the rapidity with which preparations were begun, stood in silence while the alcalde and Lockwood conversed.

He now had an opportunity to observe the latter more closely.

He saw a man of middle age, tall and powerfully built, a compact mass of bone and muscle, and one who would undoubtedly make a bad antagonist in a fight. His brown

hair was cut close, but his beard was long and luxuriant, giving him a sort of lofty look, which was heightened by his broad and powerful face.

Withal, he seemed like an honest man, and one of a remarkably strong will and reliant nature, while his language showed that he was much better educated than the average Texan.

Earl briefly related his adventures to the alcalde, and though there was nothing to stamp him as a hero, that dignitary declared that he had made a good beginning.

"We'll make a full-fledged Texan of you yet; eh, Mr. Lockwood?"

"I see nothing to prevent it," was the reply.

Buck Alden worked rapidly, and his men were as prompt to respond; so, in a very short time the full band was once more in the saddle and at the alcalde's door. Horses had been brought for Earl and Lockwood, and they were eager to see the Rangers in motion.

Once more they went away with Burbank's blessing, and, striking into a gallop, swept from the village.

Earl Harding was anxious to redeem his reputation, which he felt must suffer because of his captivity, and he longed once more to get possession of his horse, but in spite of all he could not but shiver as he thought of again encountering the thorns of the chaparral.

Probably their ride through the wood could be as rapid as possible, and mesquite and cactus had no charms for him.

He was with Buck and Lockwood near the front, and as they rode he could not but mark them as noble specimens of the Texan Ranger. Bold, powerful and honest, as he believed them to be, they were men to be safely trusted and when the fight came he felt that they would accomplish wonders.

It came sooner than any expected. Dashing through a timber-belt, every eye was for a moment fixed dead ahead as they saw a score of horsemen galloping towards them, and then Buck Alden's voice broke the silence.

"It's the gang, and we want first blood!" he cried, sharply. "Fire!"

Every Ranger flung up his rifle promptly, and a leaden hail went whistling toward the outlaws, but some of the latter were equally prompt, and Earl had not lowered his weapon when a bullet cut through his hat.

Heretofore it had been the policy of the outlaws to avoid the Rangers, but on this occasion, possibly because there was no good chance to run, they seemed as anxious for a fight as the Rangers themselves.

The rival bands swept toward each other at a gallop, and in a short time the fight became hand-to-hand. Clubbed rifles and knives were wielded with deadly effect, and for a time it was hard to tell which would win.

Earl Harding's first act was to use his pistol on a man who would have struck him with his rifle, and then, feeling that the eyes of Buck Alden would be upon him, he clubbed his own weapon and pressed into the hottest of the fight.

With the Ranger captain on one side and Lockwood on the other, he had good company, for they fought like tigers, and once the former shouted words of encouragement to him.

It was a wild scene, but one thoroughly Texan in its character, and Earl felt a thrill as he remembered it was his blood-baptism in the Lone Star Republic. By that night's work he would be gauged by the Rangers, and he shut his teeth tightly and fought as best he could.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

Several times Earl caught sight of Dexter Cook, as the outlaw moved about among the combatants, dealing hard blows, and he saw that he exercised the strongest power over his followers.

It was not that which interested the American, though. He was looking for the man who rode black Hero, and when he saw that was not Cook, he looked further.

He saw him at last, near the outer edge of the contestants, and from that moment but one thought was in his mind—to regain his favorite; so directing his course in that direction, he fought his way as fast as possible.

The rider of the black was not doing great execution. Hero had never before figured as a war-horse, and all his rider's efforts to keep him steady proved unavailing; he leaped from side to side, reared frequently and in other ways so managed the outlaw that he was practically out of the fight.

His eyes were busy, however, and he was not long in perceiving the horseman, who was so grimly making for his side. Perhaps, too, he recognized Earl, and suspected his object.

At all events, he suddenly wheeled and driving his spurs into the horse's side, dashed away from the vicinity of the fight.

He was none too soon, for Earl had cleared himself from the melee, and in a moment more he swept forward in pursuit. He did not start with any great hope, however; he knew the great speed of the black horse, beside which the utmost efforts of his own steed would be unavailing, and it seemed as though Hero must be lost in the very hour of triumph.

"If I can't catch them, I'll shoot the outlaw!" he savagely muttered.

Then he proceeded to reload his rifle, which had been emptied at the beginning of the fight, a task he had never before attempted while going at full speed.

He kept watch of the outlaw in the meanwhile to see that he did not escape by deviating from his course, and great was his surprise when the man suddenly flung up his arm, swayed in his saddle, and then went headlong to the ground.

Once there, he lay perfectly still, but Hero, frightened at the occurrence, kept madly on, and Earl galloped past the fallen man, only noticing as he went that he did not so much as raise a hand.

"Heart disease, I reckon!" muttered the American, as he pressed forward.

Hero ran for a hundred yards, and then began to moderate his pace. Earl saw this with pleasure, and, acting on

a sudden thought, called to the animal in kind and reassuring terms.

The effect was soon perceptible, and the runaway paused and allowed the pursuer to come up.

Earl caught him by the rein, spoke to him and caressed his neck, and the noble animal gave prompt signs of responsive recognition.

It was the work of but a moment to get from one saddle to the other, and then, leading the inferior horse, he turned toward the back track.

One glance showed him that the fight was over. Here and there he saw horsemen fleeing for their lives, some pursued, others unmolested, but he knew the rout of the outlaws had been complete, and he did not care to fight further.

On his way back he chanced upon the man who had so suddenly fallen from Hero's back, and being curious to know why he had thus withdrawn from the chase, he dismounted and went to his side.

The man was stone dead, but it was not until Earl turned him over that he saw that a bullet had passed clean through his neck, causing speedy death.

The American was surprised. He had heard no rifle report when the man fell—nay, he was sure there had been none for at least five minutes; and yet, a bullet had ended the life of this wretch in the moment of his triumph.

"By my life!" he exclaimed. "It was done by Magic Rifle!"

It was not a suspicion, but a conviction, and Earl looked around with some degree of awe. Man or spirit, demon or hero, the Silent Slayer was a thing of mystery for which he could not account.

He stood staring at the corpse until he saw that the Rangers were centering at the place of the fight, and then he rode forward and joined them.

The captain was the first to greet him.

"Ye did waal, my boyee, ye did mighty waal!" the eccentric Ranger declared. "Ye fit like a young Spartacus. Your recommendations are now first-class."

A responsive murmur went up from the Texans. Veterans that they were, they liked to see a new member cover himself with glory, and from that time "Jarsey," as all had begun to call Earl, was a favorite.

The victory had been complete, but not without severe cost to themselves. Five Rangers were dead and others wounded, but twice that number of Dexter Cook's band had fallen.

"Let's climb back ter Santee an' snooze afore mornin'," said Buck, when the wounded had been seen to properly. "We all need sleep, fur thar are hot times ahead. Look-wood tells me he thinks the greasers are comin' over the border ag'in, an' if they do we ain't the men ter stay in corral when we kin fight."

The gallant band cheered, and all started on the return.

Earl rode to Buck Alden's side and told him of his fresh experience with the Silent Slayer.

"Who and what is this creature?" the young man earnestly asked.

"Don't try ter guess. Conundrums are vicious things; an' an' o' mine went mad onct tryin' ter solve one! The mystery o' the Magic Rifle has puzzled me a good bit,

an' so it puzzles everybody. O' course, the silent shooter is a man—you and me don't b'lieve in spooks, Jarsey. He slings lead handily, but you need hev no fear on him. He don't make honest men his mark."

"But why is it his rifle makes no sound? Gunpowder is not usually a silent explosive."

"I reckon the cute critter has found some substitute fur it. It must be so, but I don't understand what 'tis, an' I don't know as I keer to. Es long as he lets me alone I won't meddle with his secrets."

Earl thought there was a tinge of reproof in the voice of the ranger, and he abruptly changed the subject.

"Do you expect fighting with the Mexicans?"

"I do that. Lockwood says they are goin' ter make a foray, an' he seldom gits far out of the way. Do you hanker arter it, boyee?"

"I am a Texan, and as such, ready to fight for her honor and her soil."

"Bravo, Jarsey, bravo! I like that talk, an' I am glad you are with us."

The subject was dropped as they neared the town, and in a short time Hero was locked in the alcalde's barn and Earl was fast asleep on his couch.

The sun was well up in the sky when he awoke, and on going to the common-room, he found Ohio Burbank alone. Her father had gone to talk to the Rangers, who were having some sort of a meeting, and she had been left to keep the house.

A tempting breakfast awaiting him, and as he ate, with Ohio for a hostess, he felt a strange thrill of satisfaction. Surely, Texan life was charming in the extreme and it seemed as though he could be content to forever remain there.

With this thought came another. He was one who, in spite of a life of wandering, looked forward ever to the time when he would have a home of his own. If he remained in Texas, he would not be content to settle down to a life of hermit-like bliss; he must have some one to keep the fire bright on the hearth while he was away.

With this thought he looked more closely at Ohio Burbank. He saw a fine form, a handsome face, and it required no magician's skill to tell that she was intelligent sensible and refined.

His musings were interrupted when she broke the silence, and they fell to talking of the impending invasion of the Mexicans.

Naturally, Ohio felt some timidity, but she was no coward, and the spirit of the alcalde was visible as she spoke.

Earl could say but little about the matter, knowing that she was better informed than he, but he assured her of the purpose of the Texans to protect their homes and, if possible, gain the independence for which they longed.

It would be a fight in which bravery would be pitted against the force of numbers. Their population was but a handful compared to the enemy, but they were brave, bold men, and they trusted to these qualities to win them the battle.

Naturally, Ohio felt some timidity, but she was no coward—would encounter before the war was ended, and it was perhaps well they were ignorant.

CHAPTER X.

TRAILING A SHADOW.

Earl Harding delayed long over his breakfast, but he did not forget that the Rangers were in council, and he tore himself away from his pleasant company at last and went to where Buck had left word the band would be assembled.

He found them under a large oak, and at first sight he saw that there were many there whom he had not previously met.

He pushed forward and saw the alcalde, Alden and Lockwood together by the body of the tree, and Burbank was making a glowing speech to the crowd.

"In conclusion, feller-Texans," he was saying, "let me assure you that the time which is to arrive has nearly arrived. The greasers are marchin' red-handed across our fertile acres, an' every loyal man must take the field. We go ter defend our land, our wimmin folks, our honor an' our country. Buck Alden's Rangers need reinforcin', an' a cordial invitation is hyerby given ter all hyer present ter come forwards an' jine the glorious band. Selah!"

The alcalde ceased, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead amid hearty applause.

The new recruits were then formally admitted to membership, until the total band numbered sixty. Forty more were expected from Arkansas and other towns, so that the company expected to march a hundred strong.

Heretofore, Alden had been the only officer, but it was now purposed to elect two lieutenants. A man named DeLorme was made second in command, and then Burbank named Earl Harding for the third position.

The young man was surprised and tried to decline the honor, but the alcalde and Buck had already settled the matter, and in almost the twinkling of an eye he stood dignified as Lieutenant Harding.

There was nothing more to be done then, so the Rangers dispersed to their various abiding places—the non-residents being housed by those who had cabins—and Earl went back to the alcalde's with the latter and Buck Alden.

Both were in high spirits. The idea of a hundred good and true men in the band was pleasing to them, and the captain said, with a chuckle, that Hays would have to look sharp or his command would take secondary place compared with the new organization.

Burbank himself intended to ride with them and declared that he felt young blood again coursing in his veins.

Lockwood had left the town on a good horse, bound for the border, and the Rangers were to remain quiet until his return, providing no previous news came of the invaders.

The forenoon was passed at the alcalde's house by a congenial quartette composed of the Mayor, Buck, Earl and Ohio, and every hour the newly fledged lieutenant grew more in love with his new life.

Every participant in the Texan struggle must have felt the same impulses, and no man could be so practical as not to feel the romance of the situation. Earl Harding was not the only one who, under similar circumstances, threw all his zeal into the good work.

Shortly after noon, while the young man was standing

outside the cabin, he was approached by one of the Rangers—a man named Hollis, and one to whom Earl had taken quite a fancy.

"Be you busy, leffenant?" inquired the man, not forgetting Earl's new title.

"Not at present. Why?"

"Waal, I heerd you speak ter Cap'n Alden last night about ther Silent Slayer."

"I certainly spoke to him."

"Would you like ter know who ther creetur is?"

"Yes."

"Will you go with me ter find out?"

"Go where?"

"Whar the trail leads. Ye see, this mornin', when I opened my cabin doo a dead man lay in front on't. I knowed him ter hev b'en Eph Meigs, an' as I yesterday killed his brother Hank in the fight, I suspected his object in comin' ter my cabin. He meant ter take blood fur blood, but he died at ther threshold. Ther cause was plain, fur he had received a bullet through the head."

"And you think it was one from the Magic Rifle?" asked Earl, somewhat excitedly.

"I sartinly do. Why? 'Cause of a rifle report had sounded at any hour o' the night it would hev b'en heerd. None was heerd, so it must hev b'en the Magic Rifle that did ther biz."

"Go on."

"I lined ther shot, an' found right whar ther shooters stood when he fired, and from that spot a trail leads straight away torts the chaparral."

"I think I grasp your idea. You propose that we follow the trail."

"That is my idee, an' I'll tell ye why I hev come ter you. I sorter want a man ter walk behind me and keep his eyes open while I trail, an' I know you hev an' interest in ther matter."

"That I have, and we need say no more on that head. Lead the way, and we will see what we can find."

They had no preparations to make, and in a few minutes they had lifted the trail and were going forward at a good pace. It was easy for Hollis to follow the course of the Silent Slayer in the tall grass, and he trotted rapidly forward, followed by Earl.

If they were really on the track of the mysterious destroyer, there could be no doubt as to his mortal nature. Spirits do not wear boots or leave trails in the grass.

Earl was thoroughly interested. If they could solve the riddle which had so long perplexed the men of Santee and vicinity, it would add to his own reputation and naturally he felt much interested in the secret of the Magic Rifle.

The trail was plain enough even to his inexperienced eyes, until the chaparral was reached, and even then Hollis showed no hesitation. He went on at a good pace, straight into the depths of the wood, only pausing to bid Earl keep a sharp watch so that they might not be surprised by Dexter Cook's men.

Once or twice Earl hesitated as they penetrated deeper and deeper into the place where he had already met with unpleasant adventures, but he dared not run the risk of being thought a coward by advising a premature return;

and they went on until the heart of the chaparral was reached.

Suddenly Hollis paused and pointed ahead.

His companion looked and saw a small hut before them.

"I'll bet a picayune that is his den," said the Texan.

Earl did not answer. Where had he seen that cabin before? It was familiar, but—

Ha! he suddenly remembered; it was the same in which he had the previous day found the man who had escaped Buck Alden's halter through the aid of Hobart and Billings.

He stopped Hollis and gave him this information.

"We'll go in, all the same. They may have taken ther feller away, or the Slayer may have ended him afore now."

They crept forward and listened at the door, but all remained silent. The Texan pushed aside the vines which darkened the door and then, as nothing was heard, tore them entirely out of the way.

"Come in," he tersely said.

They entered, and then paused abruptly. Two men, seemingly dead, lay on the floor and beside each was a pool of blood.

One, Earl had no trouble in recognizing. He lay near the couch, and he was the same who had lately occupied it as a sick man. He had escaped Buck Alden's halter only to die in the old hut.

From him Earl turned his gaze toward the second man, unheeding the words which were falling from the lips of Hollis. He turned the body over and made a second recognition; it was that of the man Martin, whom he had seen with Cook's band.

Two of the outlaws lay dead, but who had slain them?"

As he asked himself the last question, Martin suddenly unclosed his eyes and looked wildly at him. He was still alive, but the sands of life were running fast away.

"Mercy!" he gasped. "I am not your foe!"

"Have no fear," said Earl, who knew he was past aid, but perhaps still capable of revealing the identity of his slayer. "Do not fear me, but tell me who has done this work?"

"I fought hard for my life," said the man, faintly.

"Whom did you fight? Who struck you down?"

"I fought, but he killed me. I am dying, and now my sins cry out against me. Dying—dying!"

"Tell me the name of your murderer, quick?"

"Who should it be?—who, but him!"

"His name, his name?" cried Earl, seeing that the man was sinking fast.

The outlaw tried to rally, gasped and then whispered three words faintly:

"The—Silent—Slayer!"

CHAPTER XI.

"TO ARMS! TO ARMS!"

Close on the heels of the last word came a hollow rattling from the outlaw's throat, and the men who stood above him knew he was dead.

"He is off the trail forever," said Hollis, gravely.

"Another victim for the Destroyer," added Earl.

"I wish ther varmint had lived awhile longer. I would hev liked partic'lars o' ther way ther Slayer did it, but we shall hev ter ask him ef we get ther information."

"He may be near here now."

"It ain't likely. Afore now he is prob'ly miles away, but he must hev left a trail. Our work ain't did yet."

Earl did not answer. He was not yet sufficiently at home with Texan life to look on such scenes with indifference, and to him there was an awful solemnity about the tragedy which impressed him deeply.

That these men had deserved it was not to be doubted. but he knew not in what light to regard ther slayer. Buck Alden and others had said that he struck only the guilty, but a law-abiding man cannot look on even such killing with indifference.

"Come," said Hollis, impatiently. "Leave them thar, lefenant, an' let us look fur ther trail."

They went outside and the Texan set about finding the tracks left by the Slayer in leaving the place. He made a circuit of the hut, surveyed the ground carefully, but when he rejoined Earl there was a disappointed look on his face.

"What success?" Earl asked.

"None, so fur. I ain't found his trail, but I will look ag'in. Wait a leetle, lefenant."

Earl leaned on his rifle and looked absently at vacancy until the Texan, at the end of a five minutes' search, again returned to him.

"I reckon we are beat. The cunnin' critter has hid his trail, an' we may as waal look fur a real ghost."

"I am almost glad it is so. I have lost my taste for hunting this human tiger. Either he is a veritable demon or a man who has bitter wrongs to avenge, and, as such, he must wish to preserve his secret. For one, I shall try no further to penetrate it."

"Thar's my hand on it, lefenant. I've got my fill o' ther business, an' we will go back ter Santee an' try no more. Shall we go now?"

"Yes."

They turned their backs on the hut and started for Santee at a good pace. The chaparral was entered, the plain crossed, and the town reached without adventure.

Earl had thought it well that Buck Alden should know of the death of the man he had once tried to hang, so they went to him and told the whole story.

He listened in silence, but Earl could see he was not pleased, and when they had finished he spoke calmly but earnestly.

"I'm glad you are goin' ter give up the business. It ain't one I should care ter engage in. Whoever the Silent Slayer is, he wants ter conceal his identity, an' it may not be safe fur you or me ter meddle. So fur you hev done no harm, an' ef you stop whar you be all will be waal."

Earl plainly saw that Buck was more annoyed than his words would indicate, and he hastened to assure him that he was done with his investigations.

The interview soon ended, but it had been of a nature calculated to set the American to thinking. Did not this anxiety of the Ranger captain to preserve the secret of the Destroyer's identity mean more than appeared on the

surface? Was it not probable that he knew something of the man, or thing, more than was known to people in general?

"He wants to protect the Slayer's secret," mused the lieutenant, "and the death of the man in the hut followed close on the heels of my account of his whereabouts given to Buck on my return. By my life! I am inclined to think the Slayer is well known to him, and that he was sent by him to finish the work so ill-done by the halter."

Earl's musings terminated when he reached the Burbank cabin, and was met by Ohio at the door. In her company it was natural he should forget all else, and the moments between that time and twilight were idly but pleasantly passed.

The alcalde came in to supper in high spirits. He said additional men had been arriving every hour, and the Ranger band was then a hundred strong.

"Five-score good an' true men," he said, with a flourish of his hand. "Thar may be a few black sheep in the crowd, but I guess not. Buck Alden knows 'em all, an' he is a good judge o' men. He an' me will ride at the front, an' ther 'arnal greasers will quake with fear. Buck is a full-blooded Norther when his blood is up."

"I am ready to do what I can," said Earl, modestly, "but I do not yet know whether I am destined to be a fighting man or not."

"Don't you worry about that. You've got good blood in your veins—I kin see it plain as my nose is; and when sech men take ter the warpath thar is generally a scatterin' o' dried bones."

"All the band look as though they could fight."

"So they kin, especially when the foe be greasers. Lockwood es a hard fighter, most ekul ter Buck."

The alcalde went into another room and Earl crossed the floor and sat down beside Ohio.

"I suppose I shall soon have to bid you good-by."

"It will be lonely when you are all gone."

"And there will be danger for you as well as for those who go on the trail. The village will be nearly depopulated of men, and Dexter Cook is not yet dead."

"He will be soon, unless he keeps away from Santee. We all know how to use rifles, if we are women, and Dexter Cook don't want to molest us."

There had been a dull pain in Earl's heart at the thought of leaving Ohio, and the moment seemed one for a romantic exchange of words, but her practical answer and calm assurance had effectually nipped his high-flown speech in the bud.

Still, she was not in any way rude. Her voice was musical, her language unexceptionable and it was only the fact that she relied so fully upon herself that checked him. While they were talking the sound of a bugle arose loud and clear from the quarters of the Rangers—a sound which brought Earl to his feet and the alcalde from his room.

It was the signal to announce the return of Lockwood! "Jumpin' tarantlers!" the alcalde roared, as he skipped into view. "How I love that sound! It speaks o' good, solid fightin'. Be you ready, lefenant—be you ready?"

"Don't you see I am?" asked Earl, who stood at the door, laughing.

"See? I kain't see anything. Thar's blood in my eye—rivers on't. But we're wastin' time; let's skip."

They did skip, and soon joined the Rangers in the square below, where they were surging to and fro as only men will on such occasions.

"Stand back, an' keep quiet," called out Buck Alden. "Ef you are tractable you shall all hear Lockwood's story. Ef you keep up this howlin', I'll lead you blindfolded inter Abraham's bosom."

The wild fellows subsided at once, and Lockwood mounted a chair, which had been brought for him.

"It's a short story, fellow-citizens," he said, "for I haven't fired my rifle since I left here. The long and short of it is, the greasers are crossing the river, two hundred strong, and Pablo Montana leads them."

A howl arose from the Texans.

"Death ter the dogs! Down with Montana!"

"Of course, they are not the only ones on the war-trail. A dozen different bands are on the move and the whole boundary line is menaced, but Montana is heading straight for Santee and Arkansas.

"That's jest whar we want him!" cried Buck Alden.

Then the whole party yelled in concert, and Earl Harding caught the infection and nearly burst his windpipe in the good work.

Lockwood's story being told, he gave place to Buck.

"Feller-Texans," said the captain, "thar ain't a need o' many words 'twist you 'an' me. I've speechified you afore, an' you know my sentiments, while you've showed me your'n on ther battlefield. Texans, the tarnal greasers are on our side. Now, the question is, shall we let 'em stay?"

"No!"

"Death ter the invaders!"

The answer came in a roar.

"Then," continued Buck, "get your horses an' we will go!"

It was a simple order, but it was enough. The men rushed to where their respective animals were tied and, in a short time, all were in the saddle.

Then, with their faces toward the south they galloped from the village, the several officers and Alcalde Burbank at their head.

As they passed the house of the latter, Earl saw Ohio at the door. She waved her handkerchief, received a cheer from the men, who all liked her, and then the wild band swept away from the town to meet their untold destinies.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FIRST BATTLE.

Buck Alden had a clear purpose in view when he made his start. According to the report of Lockwood, the Mexicans were moving directly toward Santee, and if such was the fact, he intended to attack them at a place where the advantage would be with the Rangers.

At the end of an hour's riding they reached a wood, but it proved to be far more open than that with which

Earl had already had some experience—so clear, in fact, that they were able to continue at a good pace.

Half a mile farther on they reached the place fixed upon by Alden as a desirable battlefield.

The band was halted, and attended by Lockwood, Earl and the alcalde, he rode until a new scene appeared to their view, one upon which the American looked with interest.

They were standing in a well-defined trail and directly in front of them the ground descended, the trail passed through a stream and then arose to the level beyond.

The stream was known as Wild River, and it certainly deserved the name.

"Now, Lockwood," said Buck, "ef you want the post o' sentinel, you kin go over an' stand a little back from the rise."

"Let me go, too," said Earl.

"One is enough, an' we want you hyer, but ef you wish you kin go an' take a squint an' then kim back an' tell me how ther land lays."

Lockwood had promptly started, and the American rode after him.

At the ford the water was not more than to Hero's breast, but looking to the right and left, the wildness of the view impressed the young man deeply.

There were ledges over which the river leaped and fell in white foam at the bottom, miniature whirlpools and strange pits and slides, and he shuddered to think what would be the fate of a man caught in such a place.

He ascended the slope and joined Lockwood, who had paused a little beyond.

The course of the trail was visible for a half mile, and no foes were to be seen.

"No signs of them yet," said the elder man.

"Are they sure to come this way?"

"They will unless some of them know the nature of this gap, and even, it is probable, a wise and experienced general would not march an army into such a death-hole if it was possible to avoid it, but if you live among us for a year you will find that reckless courage is our ruling passion."

"I have always heard that Mexicans are cowardly."

"So they are, under most circumstances. For instance, if you had quarreled with one of them he would much rather stab you in the back than meet you in the street, hand you one of his revolvers and say, 'Let us fight it out here.' But when the greasers go on a maraud they are often as reckless as our wild Texans."

"If they ride this way they are doomed."

"Perhaps. Now, lieutenant, if you will go back to Alden and tell him they are not yet in sight, I will go a little further along the trail."

Earl retraced his steps and found Buck already stationing his men. He heard his subordinate's report and merely nodded.

"Wonder ef the Silent Slayer will take part in the muzz?" said one of the men near him.

"I reckon he'll chip in his bullet."

"Mebbe his name is on our muster-list."

"I hope not. I don't keer ter ride with sech a critter."

"Never harmed you, did he, Sam?"

"No."

"Then don't growl ag'in him."

"I don't like men who do things on the sly. Give me a man who does his fightin' an' whiskey-drinkin' above board, every time."

"That last is your strong holt, Sam."

A subdued laugh followed.

"I don't think the critter is a fein' o' flesh an' blood," said another man. "Whoever seed a mortal rifle that would kill without a sound? I tell ye the varmint is a spook, an' I know it."

Conversation ceased as Lockwood came back over the trail at a gallop. Since he moved like that it must be the Mexicans were near.

"Waal?" Buck Alden laconically questioned, as he rode up the slope.

"They are coming!"

"Full strength?"

"Yes."

"Montana thar?"

"Yes."

"How many minutes of grace?"

"Few. They are coming at a sharp trot."

"Look to your shootin'-sticks, hovers," continued Alden, turning to the men. "Remember what ye fight fur, an' fight like mad!"

They had not long to wait: there was a stir among the bushes beyond the ford, and the Mexicans dashed down the slope.

It was a fine-looking band, though not being regular soldiers none of them wore uniforms, but they sported the usual gaudy dress of Mexican cavaliers, and it seemed hard to realize that they were one and all men who had been outlaws until pardoned on condition that they would fight the Texans.

Little time was given for survey. Buck Alden's voice shouted a single word of command, and then, out from many a thicket and covert darted a stream of fire, and two-score bullets went hurtling down into the irregular mass of humanity at the ford.

It was a deadly volley, and more than one gaily dressed fellow went off his horse, floated through the water to the more rapid current below, there to be churned to pieces, perhaps, on the ragged rocks.

At the head of the invaders had rode a man of large frame and, knowing him to be the notorious Montana, more than one ranger had aimed at him, but he sat on his horse after the discharge, seemingly without an injury.

He was looking up the slope, however, with a terrible glare in his eyes.

"Charge!" he thundered, pointing forward with his sword.

Buck Alden chuckled. The volley had been a sort of decoy for the Mexicans. Only forty men had touched the trigger, the idea being to give Montana the impression that this was the whole force opposed to him and draw him more firmly into the death-trap.

Hence the exultation of the ranger when he heard the order for a charge.

At that moment, however, a voice rang clearly out, seem-

ing to come from the midst of the Texan camp, and stayed the Mexicans even as they would have advanced.

"Back, Montana, back! You are in a trap, for two hundred Texans are ambushed here!"

Buck Alden leaped back in a fury. The voice had sounded only a few yards away and with flashing eyes he looked for the traitor.

And the same moment a panic seemed to seize the Mexicans, and disregarding their leader's voice they turned and fled to cover.

CHAPTER XIII.

SCOUTING.

Buck Alden strode toward the thicket from which he believed the warning voice had sounded, and there was a terrible light in his eyes.

Of all things on earth he despised a traitor, and he was resolved that this man should meet prompt punishment. He had left his post without any directions in regard to the enemy, and when a ranger touched him on the arm and whispered that they were safely retreating, he paid no attention.

He strode into the thicket and saw Lieutenant Delorme first of all.

"Who shouted?" he huskily asked.

"By Judas! I dunno," answered the lieutenant. "The voice sounded mighty high me, but I couldn't locate it."

Buck looked beyond and saw Jack Thompson and Dave Nichols. He was staggered. Neither of these three men were of the timber of traitors, and yet—

"Jack, who spoke?"

"Shoot me if I know. It sounded close ter the lieutenant, but o' course it wasn't him."

"An' you, Dave?"

"I thought it kin from thar" said the man, pointing. "ontil I seed a head rise up an' recognized Jack."

"It was near you three. Kin none on you give me an idee? Was thar any one else hyer?"

"Not very high."

The captain looked at the trio in perplexity. They were men whom, a little before, he would not have been backward in trusting with Texas' whole future, but now it looked as though some one of them ought to know who had shouted, even if they were guiltless of the act themselves.

Just then the alcalde came back with a snort of anger as his herald.

"Howlin' tarantlers!" he said, "that squak did the biz fur us. The durned greasers hev ev'ry one tuk ter cover, er I'm a liar!"

"We want them thar fur awhile. Boyes, can't any on you guess who yelled?"

"Buck Alden," said Delorme, stepping forward. "I think you are on the wrong track. You think one on us did that same yellin' an' I kin see the suspicion in yer eyes. Now, I've scouted fur Texas fur ten y'ar, an' when my life is wanted fur her good, I'm done with it. Hyer's my knife."

an' ef you think I'm a traitor, you hev only ter plant it in my heart!"

The bold, frank way of the lieutenant won the day, and instead of accepting the knife, Buck took his hand.

"I will trust ye in a lion's mouth, Sam," he simply said.

"As fur me," said Jack Thompson, "ef you think I'm a traitor, shove me outer the bushes whar the greasers kin cover me with their guns. Ef they don't fire, you'll know I'm their ally. Ef they do, I c'ar my reputation with my life!"

"Give me the same chance," said Dave Nichols.

"I trust the three on you, but in ther name of thunder, who was it that squaked?"

"You'll never know," said the alcalde, tartly. "You hev been foolin' around these three tigers till the real cuss has got away. I thought you sharper, Buck Alden."

"Nobody has left this spot," retorted the captain. "Do you take me fur a Kimanch squaw? Boys, beat ther bushes an' shake ther trees."

It was done, and several minutes devoted to a search, for the underbrush was very thick, but no stranger was found, and Alden went back to his post with a sullen face.

He had a picked band, but in spite of this, and being of a practical turn of mind, he could not get rid of one conviction—he had a traitor in his camp!

The ford looked as calm as before. The stream had taken away the bodies of the fallen, and those who remained alive had taken to the cover of the bushes, and evidently had no taste for showing their heads.

Buck settled down in the bushes and glowered across the stream. His failure annoyed him more than he could tell, and it looked as though Montana might do a good deal of damage before he could be run into another ambush.

"What now?" the alcalde asked.

"I'm formin' a plan. One thing—we can't cross the river ourselves."

"No."

"Nor we mustn't desert ther ford."

"No."

"But we mustn't let ther greasers desert it unknown to us."

"Correct."

"Alcalde, will ye git me Jarsey an' five other good men?"

The Mayor hastened to bring them.

"Holliis," said the captain, "go ter the lower ford an' stay till you hear from me, or see signs o' the enemy. Ef you do see 'em, gallop this way like mad. You, Dan Sturgis, go ter the east ford an' do the same."

They hastened away at once.

"Now, then, you four, I want the river surveyed all the way up an' down ter see ef thar is a chance fur the critters ter cross. Mebbe they'd find a tree tall enough to bridge ther chasm, ef felled, though I don't believe it. Jarsey, you kin take a man an' go west, the other two travel t'other way."

The two parties hastened on their way on foot, and Earl looked more closely at his companion.

He was a man of middle age, quite short of stature, and

not at all broad-shouldered, but he was well rounded in chest and limb, and looked strong and active.

"What is your name?" Earl pleasantly asked.

"They call me Little Reed. I b'lieve I was christened Harvey, fur a Christian name, but I ain't heerd it fur twenty year or more."

"Very well; I shall rely on you a good deal in this work. My will is good, but I was never here before and, besides, I am a greenhorn, so called, to Texas."

"Thar ain't much ter be did except ter use our eyes."

The rocky banks of the river were for the most part closely hemmed in by trees and bushes, but owing to the sterility of the soil near the watercourse, no large trees flourished, and no great branches were thrown out to serve as bridges for would-be crossers.

Earl saw this much at first glance.

At the same time there was an excellent chance for their investigation. Bushes grew to the very verge of the banks, and in places clinging vines hung over the walls of rock like curtains. All these things made it easy for them to survey the course of the stream without offering themselves as targets for any foe who might be on the other side.

"I do not see why this gully is not fordable," said Earl, after a short investigation.

"How in thunder would ye do it?" Reed asked.

"If I don't mistake the species of those vines, they are tough enough to hold up two hundred pounds. One might go down on them as on a ladder, and then up on the other side."

"How would you cross the water?"

"Isn't there a place where it is quiet?"

"It don't look like it, lieutenant."

He spoke the truth. The wildly rushing water, in most places, churned to a white foam, was not a place any man would try to pass for the pleasure of the thing.

As they went on, rifles began to crack from the vicinity of the ford, but the firing was desultory, and they knew it to be no more than a skirmish.

In places, the way was very bushy and tangled, obliging them to move slowly, and often they were for several minutes separated from each other's view.

On one of these occasions Earl sent Reed on ahead and himself began to force his way through a thicket where thorns were so plentiful that he had to cut a way with his knife.

He reached the bank at last and looking out over the water, took in all the scenery before him—the twin chaparral on the further side, the rushing river and the impassable way, but all was as before.

He was about to retrace his steps when, as he was glancing down-stream he felt a thrill of horror as the body of a man shot out from the rock and went headlong down into the mad stream.

Amid the noise of the water it was impossible to tell whether a cry had accompanied the fall, but be that as it may, it seemed that he had gone to a certain death.

The force of the stream was clearly shown when, instead of sinking, his body was caught as though it had been a football, spun around like a top, and then carried rapidly away on the flood.

"A horrible fate!" said Earl. "I wonder who he was? If there are other men than the Rangers in this vicinity we ought to know it."

Then he suddenly paused and a look of alarm overspread his face.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING ADVENTURE.

It was not fear of bodily harm that had made Earl Harding falter, but an idea which had not until then occurred to him.

The man who had fallen into the river, either through accident or by the aid of hostile hands, had met his fate at about the place where Little Reed would have struck the canyon to take his survey.

Was he the victim?

"By my life! I am afraid the poor fellow is a gone man!" exclaimed Earl, as he turned hastily and retreated from the thicket.

His knife had made the way easier, and he gained the clearer space without much trouble.

Then he hastened along in the way Reed had gone.

He was not enough of a trailer to follow his footprints, so he had to trust to luck, and he pushed forward for some distance, but without seeing any sign of the man.

"It is dangerous, but I must call his name. If he is alive I want to know it. Little Reed!"

He listened, but only the roar of Wild River was borne to his strained hearing.

"Little Reed!"

He called a second and third time, but still without success.

"Poor fellow! he has indeed fallen into the river. The overhanging vines deceived him and he has gone to his death. He himself said that no man could live in the current."

Resolved to investigate the matter as fully as possible, he pushed forward to the spot from which the man had gone over the rocks.

The possibility that he had received human aid in his movement occurred to the lieutenant, and he used extreme caution in pushing through the bushes, but no enemy, human or otherwise, appeared to molest him, and he soon stood on the fatal spot.

He parted the bushes and peered through.

Wild River was racing before him, but there was no sign of the man who had gone to so terrible a fate.

He retraced his steps, and had gone four or five yards when, without the least warning, two men suddenly arose beside him and flung their whole weight upon his body.

A brief glimpse of one man's face was given him and he recognized it as that of Dexter Cook, and then he was beaten to the ground.

He drew his knife, resolved to make a desperate struggle, but it was knocked from his grasp and in less time than we consume in the telling, his hands were bound behind his back.

Then he was turned over and he looked up to see Cook

and Ben Hobart bending over him, while both burst into an unmanly laugh.

"We've got you ag'in, Jarsey," the latter said, between his gusts of mirth.

"So it seems," answered Earl, somewhat sullenly.

"Oh, it's a fact!"

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

"You can't guess."

"I shall not try to. I suppose I must look upon you as my enemies, and expect only rough treatment."

"Rough treatment! D'ye hear that, cap?"

"Yas, I hear," answered the outlaw. "Jarsey, I heard you callin' your chum a little bit ago. He didn't come, did he?"

"No."

"D'ye know why?"

"No."

"'Cause he is thar."

The outlaw pointed to the river.

"What do you mean?"

"Me an' Ben chucked him in."

"Into the river?"

"Yas."

"You are a demon!" ejaculated the prisoner.

"I wish I could serve all o' Buck Alden's gang thar same way. Look ye, Jarsey, 'twas only a bit ago thet I had as gallant a band at my back as ever trod Texan sile. Brave men were they, an' true es steel ter me, an' ef we had b'en let alone we would hev fit hard fur Texas when the rub come. But, no, Buck Alden must set himself up es cock o' the walk round Santee, an' when he pitted his braves 'gainst mine we got licked. Thar's only a han'ful on us left now, but what thar is left is sworn ter hang onter Alden's gang like alacrans on a sleepin' hunter. They've all got ter die."

"And you killed Reed because he belonged to the band?"

"Yas."

"You belong to it, too, Jarsey," said Ben Hobart, with terrible suggestiveness.

"Sartin he does, but I hate him wuss than I did Little Reed, an' that's why I'm goin' ter give him the death o' which I spoke. Bring him along."

They raised Earl to his feet and with their faces to the west, moved through the bushes.

The prisoner felt that his situation was terribly serious, but knowing the folly of begging for mercy, he resolved that they should not see him flinch.

He was led along the course of the river for about a hundred yards, and then they turned nearer to the bank and soon reached the edge.

"Now watch me," said Cook.

They first bound his feet, and then fixed their attention upon a sapling which grew near the bank.

After a little consultation, Ben Hobart loosened the lasso he carried about his waist, and laying hold of the sapling, began to climb it.

Earl's uneasiness momentarily increased. This looked as they were about to hang him, but, if so, why did they not select some of the larger trees rather than a branchless sapling.

Having ascended for several feet, Hobart arranged the

lasso around the single fork of the sapling, after which the lower end was bound around Earl's shoulders by Cook.

"Are you ready?" the chief asked.

"Yes," Ben answered.

"Then pull him up."

Both gave their aid at the lasso, and Earl was slowly lifted clear of the ground and then into the air.

The sapling swayed a good deal under the weight forced upon it, but Ben opposed his own person as much as possible against that of the prisoner, who was successfully raised to where his enemy was clinging.

Then the latter secured the lasso firmly to the fork.

"Now, then, get on the same side with him an' we will see the result" said Cook.

Ben slid down for a few feet before obeying this order, and then swinging around the sapling, it bent slowly toward the river.

Cook added his own weight and it went straight but steadily down until almost in a horizontal position.

Then it was that Earl Harding comprehended the fate meted out to him.

He was suspended directly over the river, some six feet beyond the bank and, bound hand and foot, was hung by the shoulders.

It was a scheme of fiendish ingenuity.

The outlaws were busy for some minutes, for only their efforts kept the sapling in position, but when another lasso had been used to tie it to some object invisible to him, and several stones laid over as weights, the tree was secured only too safely.

Meanwhile, Earl was swinging in mid-air, in a position which, though not yet painful, gave promise of soon becoming so, and where he was as helpless as a child.

They looked out at him and laughed loudly.

"How d'ye like it?" Cook asked.

Earl did not answer.

"Got a charmin' view o' the kentry, ain't ye?" mocked Ben Hobart.

"Fine air, too," added Cook.

"Good sample o' perpetual motion."

"Never be seasick arter that ride."

With these and similar speeches they taunted him for some time, but he maintained a silence which robbed their exploit of one-half its charm.

"We're goin' ter leave you now," said Cook, anon, "but we'll kim back in ther mornin' an' see how yer like it. I reckon you'll live about twenty-four hours."

"I say, Jarsey, I'm goin' ter hev that hoss o' your'n, anyway, now. Don't you wish you had sold him ter me at Arkansa, an' prevented fuder trouble? I'm goin' ter git him, an' ketch ther Silent Slayer, just as I wanted ter do at ther beginnin'."

CHAPTER XV.

A NIGHT OF HORROR.

Finding that Earl could not be made to answer their taunts, the outlaws at last bade him a mocking farewell, disappeared from his view, and their footsteps soon ceased to sound.

Then he tried to look his situation calmly in the face. At that point the water-course was about ninety or a hundred feet wide, and the foam-covered surface below him told how swiftly it ran and through what a ragged way.

His feet, as he hung, were about three feet above the water, so that, except for an occasional spatter, it did not touch him.

He was not so uncomfortable as might be thought. In his anxiety to make him secure, Ben Hobart had so wound him about, over and under the shoulders, that the strain did not yet make itself felt.

Still it would come in time and then would come other agonies—hunger, thirst—to madden him.

But would he not escape before then? His friends were less than a mile away; he was liable to be at any time discovered by scouts, or the tide of battle might sweep that way and he be found.

All these things were possibilities, with the chances, perhaps, against him to such a degree as to leave little hope, but he would not despair.

"Once let me get clear of here and I will make it hot for Cook and Ben Hobart!" he muttered. "Only fiends could devise such torture as this."

Truly, his situation was a bad one.

* * * * *

Sunset!

Earl Harding still hung from the tree, and his situation had not in any way changed, except his position had grown to be one of the utmost torture. Terrible pains darted through his shoulders and chest, the cords seemed cutting into his flesh, and even his brain began to waver before the bodily and mental torture.

Three hours later!

Earl had been through a period of unconsciousness. It was not sleep, for no one could slumber under such circumstances, nor yet a swoon, but a sort of stupor, which seemed a herald of his approaching end.

What brought him back to consciousness he did not know, but he soon became aware that the sapling was swaying in a manner not seen before since the outlaws left.

Languidly he glanced toward the bank and then, in amazement, forgot for awhile his pains.

He saw something which perplexed him greatly, for in the midst of the darkness two balls of fire were distinctly visible.

"Two camp-fires!" muttered Earl, with the want of logic peculiar to one whose brain was so weakened.

But, no! the balls of fire were moving—aye, and they were near to the bank, almost at the brink. What did it mean?

Suddenly the truth flashed upon him. The fiery objects were the eyes of some wild beast, probably those of a jaguar.

The carnivorous animal had discovered the suspended man, and crept to the bank with keen desire, but there its progress was arrested and probably it was somewhat perplexed at the situation as well as to how it could make a meal upon him.

Uneasily it moved about for some time, snuffing the air, digging the ground and rocks with its strong claws and,

at times, gently purring but no way of success was open to it.

Realizing this, perhaps, after a while, it grew uneasy and began to twist about.

To explain what then occurred we must state that during its twistings, it was lying directly upon the weight used by the outlaws to hold down the sapling, and in some way its restless movements loosened the stones.

Suddenly there was a crash, the jaguar felt its footing sliding away, and it leaped to one side just as the sapling went whizzing back to a perpendicular position.

This event was too much for the courage of the beast—it turned and fled through the forest; nor did it again venture near the spot that night.

And what of Earl Harding?

When the sapling sprung back to an upright position he was carried with it with such momentum that he lost consciousness entirely.

When he recovered he found himself in a peculiar position. He was no longer hanging by the lasso, but lying in the fork of the sapling!

A strange occurrence, one would say at first thought, but really not in the least remarkable. There was considerable slack rope between his shoulders and the tree, and when it sprung back he had naturally to go somewhere; and it was pure but very welcome luck that settled him in the fork.

Already he felt much better, his head had cleared, and his bodily pain eased up a good deal, but he soon became ambitious to get a sitting position instead of his present one.

This required considerable careful work, but after due patience and labor had been used he gained his end and found himself seated in the fork.

Then he began wrestling with his bonds, but a little exertion showed him the folly of trying, and he settled down to wait for morning.

It was a long and wearisome night, but day dawned at last, and his heart grew lighter.

Hope gave place to despair soon after, when, looking down to see the cause of a rustling in the bushes, he beheld Cook and Hobart staring in his face.

The ruffians looked the picture of amazement. Not for a moment had they thought of finding their victim in any position but that in which they left him, and when he was discovered so much at his ease a variety of oaths began to fall from their lips in large instalments.

"I say," roared Cook at last, "what are you doing up there?"

"Nothing," said Earl, coolly, for hot as they would probably soon make matters for him, he enjoyed their temporary defeat in more ways than one.

"How the deuce did that tree get loose?"

"One of your comrades came and let it up."

"It's a lie!" roared Cook.

"Fact," Earl declared.

"Who was he?"

"I didn't ask his name?"

"Waal, I don't keer a continental as long as you ain't free. We've come ter finish our work on you, an' we'll take you ter the chaparral at onct and string you up."

"Shoot him where he is," said Ben Hobart.

"Durned ef I ain't a good mind ter," Cook declared.

He had no such intention; he desired the sweeter revenge of hanging him, but he raised his rifle and looked through the double sights.

As he did so, however, he suddenly flung his arms higher in the air, reeled, and then fell to the ground, dead, the blood pouring from a hole in his temple, plainly that of a bullet.

Still, no rifle-crack had been heard!

"The Silent Slayer!" cried Ben Hobart, in terror, and then he wheeled and bounded away through the bushes, like a frightened wolf.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FIGHT AT THE FORD.

After Buck Alden sent Earl and his companions away on their several missions, he settled down to the task of watching the ford and taking care that the Mexicans did not outwit him.

He lay with his rifle beside him, ready for use, and he had ordered all of his men to fire on their own responsibility if they saw a head.

"Look hyar," said the alcalde. "I've got an idee."

"Name it, old hoss!"

"Couldn't we draw'r the fire o' the greasers by putting out one o' our caps on a stick? It's an old trick, but I reckon them durned reptyles never heard on't."

"What's you idee in drawing their fire? Kalkulate ter shoot back when they show their hands?"

"Sartin."

"We'll do it. A little stir-up will do us all good an' keep Montana from usin' what leetle wit he has got. Tom Foster, git behind a rock and hist your coonskin. You've raised skalps 'mongst a good many breeds o' reds, an' you order know how ter come this dodge."

Evidently, Tom understood the dodge very well, for a swarm of bullets soon came whizzing across the ford, but so poorly aimed, however, that not one of them touched his cap.

It was a fatal volley for the Mexicans, however, for a score of the Rangers were ready for work, and firing at the puffs of smoke when no enemy could be seen, a series of angry yells and cries of pain from the Mexican quarter told that considerable damage had been done.

This started a desultory skirmish which was kept up for half an hour, but only two men had been wounded among the Rangers, and they not seriously.

Montana, the leader of the invaders, knew nothing of the country about Wild River. He had been a typical bandit below the newly formed border, but Texas had never offered sufficient inducements for him to make a raid there; he wanted solid gold, not cattle.

When told by his followers that he must either make the ford or take a long detour, the prospect did not please him. He did not wish to slakhter his men, nor did he want to lose time by going around.

So, in spite of the assertions of his men, he sent out

scouts to search for other fording places, but they came back in an hour, unsuccessful.

Montana was furious at the news. He had already been an hour and a half or more at the ford, and had accomplished nothing—

"Carajo!" he cried. "We make the ford or die in the river!"

There were men there who trembled at the words, but they dared not oppose the imperious leader, and preparations were made for a dash.

Thus it was that the Texans, growing almost sleepy at their posts, were suddenly electrified by the sight of the gaily dressed band which shot out from the opposite banks.

Buck had divided his men into five detachments, and each one had its orders, and each had a commander, though Earl Harding continued absent despite the fact that the other party had long since returned, and these several commanders were not backward in executing their orders.

Down the slope came the Mexicans, spurring their mustangs madly forward, and then, from the Texan position twenty rifles suddenly belched forth their contents with deadly aim.

More than one saddle was emptied by the volley, more than one invader went drifting down the river, and the mild-eyed mustangs improved the opportunity to flee wherever they could.

The second detachment fired, more saddles were emptied, and the Mexicans, though nearly to the northern slope, showed a wavering tendency.

Crack!

The third division fired, and a more deadly volley never sped on its way. Such men as the Texans could not miss at that distance.

It was enough for the greasers; there was not courage enough in their bones to stand any more such carnage; and, with the once valiant Montana as ready as any of them, they wheeled and fled.

Crack!

The fourth division sent their leaden hail after the retreating band, and just as they were entering the bushes, the final volley hastened their going.

"Hurrah fur Texas!"

"Death ter ther greasers!"

These and other cries rang out from the exultant band, and even Buck Alden caught the infection, and was for a moment tempted to follow the enemy, but the recollection that they still outnumbered his men caused him to curb his desire.

Only two of the Rangers had thus far fallen, so he could well afford to be content.

It was within an hour of dark and when he had looked after his command a little the captain again inquired for Earl and Little Reed.

They had not returned.

"It's mighty queer!" he muttered.

"I reckon they are in some sort o' trouble," the alcalde said.

"Jarsey seems always in trouble."

"That'll wear off when he gets broke in; thar's good stuff in ther boyes," the alcalde hastily said.

"Sartin ther is," said Buck, hastily, "or he would never

have got a position in my band. I reckon I had better send a scout ter look arter them."

He did as he had said, and just then Jack Thompson came to him.

"I reckon I kin throw some light on that myster'ous v'ice," said the Texan.

"Kin you? Good! What is it?"

"I felt sure thar must hev 'ben an interloper in ther camp, so I nosed under ther vines an' finally found a hole big enough fur a man ter travel. I went inter it, an' it led me fur fifty feet an' then I come out in the bushes. This warn't all. I seed footprints I knowed, an' beside them this knife."

He handed a long-bladed weapon to Alden, who saw the initials "D. C." cut on the handle.

"Meanin' Dexter Cook," said the scout. "Leastwise, they was his tracks."

The mystery was explained, and though Buck's first feeling was one of admiration for the audacity of the man in daring to raise his voice in the midst of his enemies, he felt he had a duty to perform.

He apologized to Jack for having for a moment suspected him, and then went to Lieutenant Delorme and Dave Nichols and did the same to them. Captain though he was, he was always ready to do all in his power to right any wrong he had committed.

The man sent to look after Earl and Reed returned soon after dark, but he reported that he had been unable to find any trace of them, and there was no time to do more than night.

Buck determined to end the fight at one bold stroke. If they waited for any further move on the part of the Mexicans the victory might be more easily won, but the Rangers were growing restless; they were anxious for a fight, and he determined to please them.

Accordingly, the word was passed along the line that they would make an attack in turn, and they prepared for the work.

Then, leaving their horses behind them, they went silently down the slope, their directions being to move thus until discovered and then make a dash.

Down the slope and through the river they went without being molested, and then, like panthers stealing on their prey, they began to ascend the other side.

If there were Mexican guards, they were strangely negligent, and this negligence cost them dearly.

When at last the alarm came the Rangers were ready, and with ringing cheers they dashed forward to mingle in the affray.

It was afterward learned that the Mexicans were just prepared for such a move themselves, and they were all in a group when the Texans burst through the bushes and attacked them.

The scene that ensued was a wild one.

Weapons were discharged at close quarters and then the fight became hand-to-hand, but the vast superiority of the Rangers was soon shown; the enemy did not long stand before them, but broke and fled in all directions.

When the conflict was over it was found that out of all the proud army less than fifty had gone away alive, but when one of the men left as a guard over the horses came

with a report that Montana and a score of his followers had passed them and gone on at a gallop toward Santee, an uneasy feeling assailed all.

"Back ter the town!" was Buck Alden's terse order.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS RIFLE.

The fall of Dexter Cook had been as much of a surprise to Earl as it was a terror to Ben Hobart, and after the precipitate flight of the latter he sat and gazed down at the dead outlaw with a blank face.

"I must shout for help," said the prisoner. "I can never get out of this fix alone, and surely Buck Alden will have some one out looking for me. They may hear my cries."

Accordingly, he began to shout, and it was not a great while before a responsive cry came from up the river. He repeated his calling with energy.

Presently the answering shout came again and then he waited patiently as footsteps approached the spot.

The cause of the fresh sounds then made his appearance, and Earl's face brightened as he saw it was Lockwood.

The Texan looked at him in surprise.

"What the dickens are you doing there?" he asked.

"I am tied in this tree."

"What!"

Earl repeated his assertion, and Lockwood came forward, but nearly stumbled over Cook's body.

"Hallo! who did this?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you when I am down. Hurry, in mercy's name, for I am half dead."

"I am happy to see this ruffian disposed of, whoever did it. He was a cut-throat of the worst type."

The Texan laid down his rifle, and with his knife between his teeth climbed the sapling after some effort after which he released Earl and both descended to the ground.

Lockwood then suggested that they go at once to Santee, and they started through the chaparral.

The American still felt somewhat stiff and sore after his night's experience, but he was so exhilarated by his escape that he disregarded these things and pressed forward, cheerfully, at Lockwood's heels. Their course was through the heart of the chaparral, but the guide gave little heed to the obstruction, and led forward at a good pace.

Not far had they gone, however, before the sound of rifles from the east brought them to a halt.

A single shot had opened the concert, but others followed in rapid succession until a score or more had sounded, and then came a brief silence.

"What is it?" Earl asked.

"Firing at the ford," Lockwood tersely answered. "There is more fighting there."

"How do you account for it?"

"Very likely it is between Montana's men and our Rangers. I think Buck Alden left men to guard the passage, and it may be Montana is trying to get through."

"Hark! more firing!"

"Texan rifles, those are. Shall we go that way?"

"By all means. I want a chance to redeem myself," said Earl, quickly.

The way toward the east was less intricate than that through which they had been passing, and they broke into a trot.

The rifle shots continued for a few minutes and then ceased altogether, and then Lockwood suddenly paused.

"Hark!" he said.

They paused, and Earl plainly heard a threshing in the bushes ahead, as though horses were coming.

"Into that thicket," said the Ranger. "It may be to our advantage to keep out of sight."

They sought the cover, and it had hardly been done before two horsemen came in sight, riding at a brisk pace. The first was a man whose dress and face proclaimed him a Mexican, while the second was none other than Ben Hobart.

"They must die!" hissed Lockwood. "Do you take the greaser and I will look after Ben Hobart. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Together, then. Now, fire!"

They pulled the triggers simultaneously, but the hammer of Earl's rifle fell in vain. No report followed.

He thought that Lockwood had been equally unsuccessful, but looking at their intended victims, saw Ben Hobart reel and fall from the saddle.

He had been shot, but by whom? There had been no rifle report near them and neither he nor his companion had done the deed.

Stay! As he glanced toward Lockwood he saw smoke slowly curling from his rifle barrel!

"By my life! you are the Silent Slayer!" he impulsively cried, and regretted the expression of his suspicions as soon as it was made.

"Put a fresh cap on your gun," said the guide, with calm brevity.

The man at whom he had aimed had disappeared, so Earl tore off the cap which had failed him, looked well to the tube to see that no imperfection existed there, crowded on a fresh cap and turned to Lockwood.

The Texan was looking keenly into his face, and he tapped the barrel of his rifle.

"It is loaded," he quietly said, "and when another enemy appears it is ready for use, but it will give out no sound when discharged. Look, Earl Harding, this is the Magic Rifle, and I am the Silent Slayer!"

The American looked at the weapon, which seemed just like his own, and then back to the destroyer's face. He had solved the mystery which had perplexed so many men, but he feared he had incurred Lockwood's anger by having expressed his views.

"You know me as I am," continued the Texan, "but I ask it as a favor that you will betray me to no one. Only you and Buck Alden know that I am the Silent Slayer, and I would have kept the fact from you had not your rifle failed to speak. I planned to pull trigger simultaneously with you in which case you would have thought two reports were blended in one."

"Your secret is safe with me," said Earl, promptly, "and I promise not to betray you by word or sign."

"It is well, young man."

The Texan reached out his hand and they crossed palms in a warm and friendly grasp.

Known as he was, there was nothing terrible about the Silent Slayer.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

"I suppose you will wonder why I am figuring in such a mysterious and deadly role," continued Lockwood, "but there is nothing strange about it. Once I had a home and family here in Texas, but when a gang of outlaws composed of white men and Comanche Indians burnt my cabin and murdered my family, I swore vengeance upon them, and I have kept the vow. Dexter Cook was their leader, and this is why I have been such an implacable enemy of his gang."

"But," said Earl, "I do not understand the rifle you carry. Why is so deadly a weapon a silent one?"

"I use a substitute for powder which I myself discovered. I will explain the whole secret to you when we have time, but just now we have need of activity. Let me look first of all at Ben Hobart's body."

They went to where the rufian lay, cut off in the midst of his crimes by the Magic Rifle.

Well aimed the shot had been, and a red line crossed his face where the bullet had let out his life fluid.

"So perished one of my deadliest enemies," Lockwood absently said.

"And a most detestable villain," added Earl.

"Let us go on to the ford. We may be needed there."

They resumed their way, but scarcely a hundred feet had been passed over when suspicious sounds were again heard in advance.

"More horsemen and several of them," Lockwood said. "It would not surprise me if it was the Mexicans in retreat. We will take to the brush and see what they are made of before we reveal ourselves."

Nearer came the sounds, and then suddenly three horsemen dashed into view, all Mexicans, and riding with as much haste as the way would permit.

It was not the sight of them, however, which made Earl grasp Lockwood's arm in a vise-like grip—he had seen more than the miserable marauders.

One of the horses was carrying double, and this extra load, which the fellow carried before him on the horse, was a girl—more, it was Ohio Burbank.

"Do you see?" hissed the young man.

"Yes."

"I will save her or die!"

"Certainly, and I am with you. Shoot the man on the right and I will take her captor. It is a slightly risky shot, for I must put a ball within an inch of her scalp to drop him. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Ready, fire!"

Again they pulled trigger together, nor did Earl's rifle fail this time. The report rang out sharply and at the same moment a stream of fire flashed from the muzzle of the Magic Rifle.

Two falls immediately followed—the men whom they had covered went headlong to the ground, their career of crime forever over.

When Ohio's captor fell he had first thrown up his arms convulsively, and by catching at the horse's mane she succeeded in keeping her seat, but the success was but temporary. The fractious mustang, alarmed at what had occurred, shied sharply to one side, and in a moment more he was dashing away with the girl dragging from the saddle, held only by her dress which had caught on the pommel.

Earl felt his blood chill and snatched his pistol from his belt, small as he knew the chances of dropping the animal to be, but there was one who was before him.

Lockwood, at the first sign of danger, had sprung from the thicket and a single movement served to cast off the lasso he had appropriated when he rescued Earl from the sapling.

Quicker than it takes to tell it, the rope circled through

the air and fell with unerring aim upon the neck of the mustang.

The animal had not yet run far enough to get under full headway, and though he dragged the resolute ranger some feet he was soon subdued.

Earl had at once bounded forward, and even before the mustang ceased its struggles he had snatched Ohio from her perilous position and turned toward his companion. There he saw a startling sight, for the third Mexican, who had evidently been hesitating between fear and what he deemed duty, was glancing along his rifle barrel with the muzzle covering Lockwood.

Again the American snatched his pistol from his belt, and an adept in its use, its voice was almost instantly heard.

A breath later came the report of the Mexican's escopeta, but the bullet whistled wide of the mark, and the ranger looked around to see the invader swaying in his saddle. Only for a moment, and then he went headlong to the ground.

Lockwood deftly twisted the lasso around a tree.

"Earl," he said, coming forward, "you have saved my life, and I thank you for it."

"And what shall I say?" demanded Ohio. "I owe as much to both of you, and words fail me now."

"Say nothing now, young lady, but tell me what the situation is——"

He paused as a renewed crackling sounded in the bushes to the east.

"Montana and his men are coming!" cried Ohio.

"Into the bushes!" cried Lockwood. "We——"

The order came too late. A dozen men, all Mexicans, dashed into view, with Pablo Montana at their head, and their keen eyes at once perceived the trio before them.

"Ha! the girl, and rescued!" cried the ex-outlaw. "There has been destruction here as well as elsewhere. Seize her and kill the men!"

Lockwood clapped his hands to his mouth and sounded a shrill whistle which could have been heard far away.

"That'll bring Buck Alden, if he is near," he said, coolly. "Now put your back against this thicket and fight with your bowie to the death!"

Earl had thrown his rifle behind him, and Ohio at once caught it up and began to reload. Experience enabled her to do this as quickly as a man, and as she crowded on the cap she saw there was no time to lose.

Montana was reloading a pistol he had somewhere secured—probably not another was possessed by his band—and there was murder in his eyes.

With an inward prayer for pardon, Ohio raised the rifle, the muzzle covered Montana's breast for a moment and then she pulled the trigger.

Crack!

As the sharp report rang out, the Mexican dropped his deadly toy, reeled and fell headlong from the saddle.

"Montana is shot!" shouted Lockwood, in the language of his enemies.

The cry had the desired effect. With their leader down the prospect was dark enough, the invaders wavered and when, just then, Buck Alden and his Rangers dashed into view, the Mexicans gave no thought to the order of their going, but fled in wild alarm.

They were promptly pursued, but Buck and Alcalde Burbank paused beside our friends and the father caught his daughter to his arms.

In the pursuit, the Rangers came upon Little Reed at the lower end of the arroyo, badly hurt, but he finally recovered and lived to fight well for the Lone Star.

The band went back to Santee with flying colors, metaphorically speaking, and between the praise of his associates and the thanks, softly expressed, of pretty Ohio, Earl's head was nearly turned.

Our story is done in detail.

Earl Harding rode through the battles of the Texan Republic, and afterwards when the United States espoused her cause, triumphantly, and the fame of Buck Alden's Rangers was national.

When the last battle was fought, Earl retired to private life on a Texan ranch. Ohio had for some time been his wife, and their after life was peaceful and happy.

Alden and the alcalde settled as his neighbors, and the battle-scarred veterans were wanting in nothing to make them happy, for Texas, loved Texas, was free!

Earl never saw Lockwood after they parted in the chaparral. Shortly after occurred the tragedy of the Alamo, and among the noble dead was the man of mystery.

Our friends remembered him with all kindness, and when winding up an eulogy, Buck Alden could think of no prouder epitaph than—

"He was a Texan!"

NOTICE

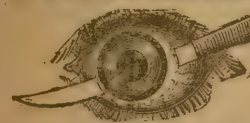
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CHOICE READING MATTER.

A giant wildcat that had been slaughtering quail and cottontail rabbits in Golden Gate Park for the last three years was trapped recently by George J. Barron. The park gamekeepers and others often caught sight of the destructive beast, but it was so wily that they never could get an opportunity of drawing a bead on it. The great cat was thought to come from the Santa Cruz Mountains. Recently the lad rigged up a plain box trap and baited it with a piece of fresh beef, setting the contrivance of the shrubbery near the chain of lakes. He returned several hours later and found the big cat snared in the trap. Prof. William G. Blunt, curator of the natural history department of the museum, was sent for, and after a close examination of the beast at a safe distance pronounced it a fine specimen of the hybrid wildcat of California. As hybrids of all kinds in the class of mammals are barred from the museum the cat was killed and buried at the foot of a Monterey cypress. The animal weighed forty pounds and was one of the largest specimens that the professor had ever seen.

J. Carvallo of the Marey Institute, Paris, France, has recently succeeded in making cinematograph X-ray pictures showing the process of digestion both in warm and cold-blooded animals. The value of these results is obvious, as these moving pictures gave us an actual view of the interior workings of the human body, and for the first time physicians have been able to see an absolutely reliable reproduction of our organs in action. Many attempts have been made to produce this result, but they have failed because of the difficulty experienced in obtaining the Röntgen pictures with exposures lasting but a small fraction of a second; also because no suitable cinematographic apparatus was available for producing the pictures. The animals under test were fed with an alimentary paste or with their usual food mixed with a basis of bismuth nitrate. The results of these pictures have been checked by special investigations showing that the pictures are true photographs of the actual movements of the organs. Mr. Carvallo has produced X-ray pictures which are said to show the digestive process in the most differently constituted animals.

One of the natural wonders of the world is the great pitch lake of Trinidad, the most southerly island of the British West India. Paying better than any gold or diamond mine, the lake is locally known as "The Black Diamond." An American syndicate handles most of this natural asphalt under a concession from the government, and from one corner

of the lake obtains 800 tons every day. Close to the village of La Brea, the lake is inspected every year by numerous visitors to the island, for it is a curiosity not to be seen elsewhere. The lake lies 138 feet above the sea and is three miles in circumference. How deep it is nobody knows, for, though many attempts have been made to fathom it, all have failed. To all appearances this is, indeed, "the bottomless pit." Scientists describe the pitch substance as "bituminous matter floating on the surface of fresh water." For three feet down the pitch is solid enough to bear the weight of men, and to allow their digging it up in great slabs with paxes and spades. Under the hard surface is liquid pitch, cast up by subterranean fires, and under that again is the fresh water of the lake.

RIB TICKLERS.

Ethel—Do you meet many people while wheeling? Tom—Oh, yes; I run across a friend occasionally.

He—You say you like a manly man. What is your idea of a manly man? She—well, for instance, one who doesn't stay and stay just because he knows the girl isn't strong enough to throw him out.

Miss Brown—Whut foah's Lize Jackson puttin' on sich airs? Miss Johnsing—Hain't yo' done heerd dat her 'lashuns was descended from den Fillypeens whut Mars' Dewey done captured?

The Young Man—Gracie, what is it your father sees in me to object to, darling? The Young Woman (wiping away a tear)—He doesn't see anything in you, Algernon; that's why he objects.

Crimsonbeak—Bill's wife dropped in at the office the other day and caught her husband kissing the pretty typewriter. Yeast—I suppose she spoiled everything? "Well, Bill's nose looks as if it was spoiled, but that's all."

William—Have a drink, Si? Si—I can't, for two reasons. William—What are they? Si—One reason is, many years ago I promised my dear old mother that I would never touch liquor again. William—And the other? Si—Just had a drink.

"Yes," said Rev. Fourthly, at the dining table, "in the beginning of creation the Lord said 'Let there be light,' and there was light." "I'm afraid," timorously observed the poor boarder, "that somehow He overlooked my hall bedroom."

"Minnie," said a mother to her naughty three-year-old daughter, "what is the reason you and little brother Harry can't get along without quarreling?" "I don't know," was the reply, "unless it's because I take after you and Harry takes after papa."

"I was glad to notice, Bridget, that when you walked out last night you did not let your young man grab you by the arm, after the boorish fashion so common among people who ought to know better." "Yis'm, I towld him to lave me arrum alone. I was afraid he'd hurt me vaxination."

Simpkins—Brace up, old man. Take a more cheerful view of life. Why borrow trouble? Addison—Speaking of borrowing, I would find it much easier to get along without borrowing trouble if you would let me have the ten dollars you borrowed from me for two days about a year and a half ago.

JUDGE LYNCH FOILED

By John Sherman

In the great West, upon what is called the border, Judge Lynch acts with about as much reason as some of our more legally authorized courts. Many an innocent man has been hung by what is termed Lynch Law, and so have many men been hung by the more authorized mode.

We are glad to know that the days of patrols, lynch laws, kluklux and border ruffians has almost passed. Under the more benign influences of civilization we are getting over it, even on the border. In Missouri, near the Kansas border, Judge Lynch has reigned supreme for years, and still holds a fair sway.

In fact, Missouri as a State has hardly recovered from barbarism. Border ruffians exist in other places than on the borders; they exist all over the State. The principal cause, if we may be permitted to philosophize about the unruly Missourians, is their hot-headed prejudice and passion. The finer elements of society are not unknown in that State; but her leaders, and above all, her judiciary, from the Supreme Bench down, is disreputable, and both civil and criminal law is a mockery.

Neither life nor property is safe in the courts of Missouri if the judge trying the cause should see fit from personal prejudice, or to gain public favor, to decide against you. You must humble yourself and fawn to a public magistrate, or you will not get justice.

The lawful judges have been known to instigate mobs to hang men whom they feared they could not legally convict. When a Missouri populace clamors for a man's life they will have it, and it makes no difference whether he ever committed a crime or not. On the other hand, if they choose to spare a criminal, he can never be convicted, though his sins be as mountains. The consequences are that murderers and thieves run riot in this State, to the terror of law-abiding citizens. The cause of this is a corrupt judiciary and officials.

As we asserted, Judge Lynch is about as apt to be right as those justices who sit upon the bench, and neither can be relied upon.

In such a state of society there are many wild and exciting events. There are also many deeds of chivalry and heroism which would fill volumes. Missourians are seldom cowards. They understand the use of the revolvers, and have all smelled gunpowder and blood.

It is only a little over a score of years ago that the border was all aflame with fire and steel. Men were hung at almost every crossroads, or called to the doors of their houses in the night and shot down.

It is to that period of history known as Bleeding Kansas which ushered in the great war of the Rebellion, that we call the attention of the reader. In spite of the dark cloud which hung over the West there was a great influx of emigration.

Pioneers are always brave men, and they carry their rifle in one hand and their lives in the other, when they move out on the frontier.

Indians were small foes when compared to the border ruffians, and there were, in reality, no Indians in Missouri at the time of which we speak.

Ned Haldie was a brave young man who emigrated to the Western border of Missouri, when it was almost dangerous for a man to enter that State.

Ned was from Ohio, with Free State ideas, such as were very disagreeable to a Missourian. He also had a span of excellent horses which excited the covetous greed of his neigh-

bors. He purchased a small farm, and moved his young wife and two children onto it.

His residence was near the eastern banks of the swift, dark Missouri. His home was humble, but he had ambitious dreams of a better in the near future. A country so rich in soil and abundant in resources could not fail to fully requite him for his labors.

But he soon found that his independent expressions about certain matters were not favorably received by his neighbors. More than all, he noticed that covetous eyes were turned upon the blooded stock he had brought with him.

Ned was brave as a lion, and had no intention of having his ideas crushed out of sight. He had always been used to free speech, and he did not see as it was any of Missouri's business how the Territory of Kansas was admitted into the Union.

No man in Missouri can be indifferent on any subject. He must either be hot or cold.

Ned soon discovered this, but he determined to obey the dictates of his own conscience.

One day he was at the village of Weston, on business, when a gang of roughs gathered about him.

"Well, so ye've got some decided notions about Free State matters, hev ye?" said one.

"Yea," answered Ned, without a moment's hesitation. "I think every man should think and act as he pleases. Kansas need not worry us, and every man should vote to suit himself in it."

"Well, we'll see," roared the border ruffian, with an oath. "We'll see."

"I don't care to argue the matter, Mr. Ellison," said Ned. "You are a lawyer, and know more about such matters than I, but you could not convert me with all your law and logic."

"But there is more convincin' argument than law or logic," said the border ruffian lawyer, who afterwards became a lawful judge, though he had been a mob judge before.

"What is it?" asked Ned, innocently.

"A rope!" was the answer.

A wild shout went up on the air at this assertion—the shout heard only in mad mobs and riotous assemblies.

"You need not threaten me, Mr. Ellison, for I will not be frightened," said the gallant young man.

"Well, we'll see—we'll see!" cried the infuriated man, hurrying away, followed by his comrades.

Not knowing but that he might be in danger, Ned Haldie hurried through with his business and went home.

Mounted on his blooded horse, he galloped along the road at a swift pace. The road led through the woods, and, as most wooded roads in Missouri are, was bounded on either side by thick, almost impenetrable hazels and stunted crab-apple bushes.

While passing along, lost in reverie, a gun-barrel was thrust out at the road side. He saw the gleaming muzzle, and gave his horse a cut.

"Bang!" went the gun, and a ball whistled through the air, passing within a few inches of his head.

The horse bounded away with the speed of the wind, and, though two more shots were fired at him, neither touched him. Ned regarded his escape as almost miraculous.

He reached home, and placed his horse in the stout log stable, about fifty yards from his stout log house, and then sat down to collect his scattered faculties.

What should he do? He was satisfied now that his neighbors intended to take his life. Only a few days before he had received an anonymous letter informing him that he had better leave the country, or he would be hung. He now fully realized the truth of the threat.

(Continued on page 32)

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(Continued from page 29)

"Yes, I must go, but I cannot go to-night. I hardly dare tell my wife of this assault upon my life, it would drive her frantic. But what shall I do? She must learn it all sooner or later. Besides they may attack our house this very night."

When he entered the house, he found his young wife almost wild with terror. A neighbor woman had been there and notified her that an attack was to be made on their house that night.

Then his life was really in danger. He took down his rifle and loaded it with care. He also had a double-barreled shot gun, which he loaded with nine pistol balls in each barrel.

He had a six-shot revolver, which he kept in readiness.

"We can but die, my dear," he said to his wife, as he made the preparations.

She prayed Heaven that the attack might be deferred until they should have a chance to escape. But the pro-slavery men had determined to teach the free-sollers a practical lesson.

That night, as the young husband and father watched from the window, he saw a dark shadow glide from the woods into the small clearing.

It was a man, though his features could not be made out in the star-light. He paused a moment and beckoned to others, who came out rapidly, until forty-six men stood out in the clearing.

They first moved away toward the stable, the door of which faced the house. They tried to open it, but failed.

"Wait," he heard one say, "He must have an ax near, and we will break the lock."

Thinking it time to speak and save his property, the young pioneer now called out from the small window:

"What do you men want? Go away from my premises."

"Hello! we've roused him," said a voice, which he recognized as Ellson. "Now, Dick Toole, Seth James, Hatch, and all the others o' ye, come on, and we'll jest settle his case."

"Halt! Go back, or I will fire on you!" cried the young farmer.

"No, ye won't, I guess."

"I will."

"Ye dasen't!" cried Ellson, with a derisive grin on his face. He was walking along by the side of Hatch. The latter had taken his rifle from his shoulder, and was evidently trying to wait for a shot.

The young man had seized his double-barreled shot-gun, and stood near the barricaded window.

"Crack!" went Hatch's rifle, and the bullet sang through the air and buried itself in the window-sill not six inches from Ned's head.

"Bang!" went one barrel of his shot-gun, and the pistol balls made sad havoc among the enemy.

Two fell either killed or badly wounded, while it seemed that half a dozen more were more or less wounded.

But neither Ellson nor Hatch, the real instigators, were injured.

They pressed forward, firing their guns at the windows, and evidently little caring whether they killed the woman and children or not.

"They may look out now," cried the young man.

"Bang!" went a second shot from the shot-gun, and he seized his rifle.

Now there came a lull in the attack.

Old Tom James had been killed by this shot, and the mob paused a moment to consult.

The young man who was defending himself and family, shouted from the window:

"Why do you men seek to take my life?"

"We don't," answered Ellson. "But you have committed a most foul murder. You have killed Mr. James."

"I did it in self-defense."

"You are charged with treason and horse-stealing," said Ellson.

"What horses?"

"The ones you have."

"They are mine. I brought them from Ohio."

"You will have to submit to a trial," said Hatch. "Ellson is to be the judge, and I will defend you. You shall have a fair trial."

Then the attack was renewed. He fought as long as he could.

A shot broke his left arm, and another killed the baby in its mother's arms.

Seizing his revolver, the almost distracted father tore open the door and opened fire on the enemy.

But his pistol was soon emptied, and then they burst in on him.

He was knocked senseless, and the distracted wife, with the dead child still in her arms, fled from the house. The other little thing clung horrified to its mother's dress, while its father was dragged away.

The helpless man was dragged away, and one of the men proposed plundering and burning the house, and then proceeding with the trial.

The suggestion was followed, and Ellson, the man who knew something of law, was called upon to preside over the trial.

Hatch, as he agreed, defended the prisoner with such spirit, that it was after daylight before the jury convicted the prisoner of both theft and murder.

The wife, crazed with fear and horror, had stolen away in the forest with the dead babe still in her arms, and the other clinging to her.

No sooner had the jury returned the verdict of guilty than a yell rose on the air, and a dozen hands seized the stupefied man. (This was Justice Lynch.) They dragged him violently down the hill toward the river. Tom Cummins, Dick Toole, Seth James, Ellson, and Hatch, carried the doomed man to the tree which grew in full view of the river.

Tom Cummins placed a rope around his neck, while Hatch held one leg and Dick Toole the other.

Seth James held his arms down to his body, while his judge and executioner climbed up to put the rope over the limb of the tree.

The thunder of horses' hoofs was heard at this moment, and looking around, the stupefied man saw an officer of the United States Cavalry, followed by four mounted soldiers, approaching.

"Hold!" cried the officer. But the lynching party dropped their intended victim and fled.

"Fire!" cried the officer.

A rattling crash of fire-arms rang on the air.

Dick Toole and Tom Cummins fell, shot dead.

Hatch was severely wounded, but crawled away, and the others escaped unhurt.

The officer and his men released the wretched man, and listened to the story of his wrongs.

They had quartered near, and took Ned to the camp, where his wounds were dressed by the surgeon.

They volunteered to help him find his wife and remaining child.

For four days they searched for them in the forest, and at last found the mother sitting at the root of a tree, dead, the body of her infant still in her arms. By her side was the other child, just alive.

It was spared to Ned Hald, however, and in a few weeks he returned to the East, glad to escape the clutches of Justice Lynch.

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